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Emotions as pedagogical tools: The role for educational developers in university learning and beyond

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Abstract

In light of concern about student mental well-being and pressure for universities to take action, we present an approach for increasing awareness and challenging assumptions around the importance of emotion in learning and teaching. We draw on Barrett's (2017) and Pekrun's (2006) theories and our experience to explore how, as educational developers, we can inform the ways academics and students make sense of and regulate emotions inherent in education. Key areas of focus include educational development activities to reconceptualise the role of positive and negative emotions in learning (Pekrun & Perry, 2014).

1   Introduction

Academics have a responsibility to inspire their learners to recognise the central role of emotions in their discipline's learning and teaching. Some do this through sharing their enthusiasm for topics and learners' progress (Cavanagh, 2016) and modelling how they handle pressure and disappointment. Others lack awareness of how crucial emotion in learning can be. Educational developers, with their cross-disciplinary and theoretical insight, are well-placed to lead in this collaborative endeavour, and have a valuable role to play in conceptualising emotions as pedagogical tools in curricula and for graduate futures. This paper outlines our concept based on a workshop we have developed.

2   Reframing student well-being

In recent years student well-being has become a source of growing concern for universities internationally (Neves and Hillman, 2019; Van der Heijde, Vonk & Meijman, 2015; Barra Stolzenberg, 2018). In the UK, the new University Mental Health Charter (Hughes & Spanner, 2019) sets out principles for making student mental well-being a strategic priority. This policy-level activity is accompanied by pedagogical recommendations such as embedding mental well-being in university curricula (Houghton & Anderson, 2017). However, there is disagreement over the academic's responsibility and role in so-called "therapeutic education" (Ecclestone & Hayes, 2019). Others warn against the risk of over-medicalising normal emotions of young adults responding to university life (Wessely, 2019). The challenge faced is acknowledged as being complex, including the need to better understand what is meant by student well-being (UUK, 2017). Whilst not dismissing mental health difficulties, our aim is to problematise the broader concept of well-being by asserting that even perceived negative emotions are valuable assets that should be worked with, and not avoided. Departing from the language of "support" and "management" of emotions, we seek to challenge teachers' and students' assumptions and reframe existing ideas about emotion in university learning and teaching. We aim to embed practical approaches to increase emotional awareness in institutional practice and culture. This more sustainability-focussed view of emotions for

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learning recognises the need to prepare our graduates for uncertain futures (Barnett, 2004), and the variety of emotions that are likely to be evoked by this uncertainty.

Academic pressures, particularly assessment, are recognised as most challenging to well-being (El Ansari et al, 2011). Given that it would be impossible and unhelpful to remove all stressors from university study, a desirable alternative is to create environments where students explicitly learn to cope with normal stressors. This may involve recognising and re-categorising their emotions (Barrett, 2017), such that academic challenge arouses curiosity and satisfaction, not frustration or anxiety, and may become energising, not draining. The active learning environment where greater interaction between students and teachers gives rise to a range of emotions (Charalambous, Hodge & Ippolito, 2020) presents opportunities and challenges.

3   *Conceptualising emotions in learning*

Encouraging positive engagement with emotions requires better understanding of how students and teachers recognise, make sense of, attribute and regulate emotion in active learning settings. We are inspired by Lisa Feldman Barrett's theory of constructed emotion, as opposed to the classical view of emotions being limited and universally recognisable (Barrett, 2017). She defines emotion as a goal-based concept, which individuals construct depending on physiological sensations, context and what they want to achieve. "Emotions are not reactions *to* the world; they are your constructions *of* the world" (Barrett, 2017: 104). We complement this with Pekrun's control-value theory (2006), which emphasises the role of an individual's appraisals of a situation in emotion. For example, a student's appraisal and resulting emotional response may relate to how much perceived *control* they have of an assessment task and its outcomes, or how much they see *value* in the topic or activity. Pekrun and colleagues distinguish between achievement emotions, those "tied directly to achievement activities or achievement outcomes" (Pekrun, 2006: 316) and epistemic emotions, which relate to the acquisition and generation of knowledge (Pekrun et al, 2017).

4   *Application to research*

The emotions identified through exploratory, qualitative research (Pekrun & Perry, 2014) enabled development of the Achievement Emotion Questionnaire and the Epistemically-Related Emotion Scale. The emotions listed in these tools can be seen in Figure 1 (achievement emotions indicated in blue, epistemic emotions in red, emotions belonging to both categories in purple). These are largely used in quantitative studies; however, we are taking a more qualitative, dialogic and collaborative approach by allowing participants to construct their own meanings and attributions. This phase of research involves teaching teams of three participants taking part in 90-minute semi-structured group interviews, via MSTeams. This begins with a conversation around emotions they anticipate, desire, and observe in learners and experience themselves in active learning classrooms. Next is a digital card sort activity, based on Pekrun and colleagues' achieving and epistemic emotions. The first activity (Fig. 1) involves each participant selecting 2-3 emotions and elaborating which aspects of the active learning environment generates that emotion in learners and why this might be.

a. Which emotions does this active learning experience produce?

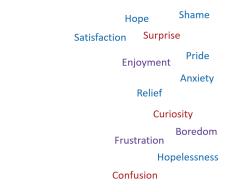b. Which aspects seem to produce which emotions?

Hope   Shame
Satisfaction   Surprise
Pride
Enjoyment
Anxiety
Relief
Curiosity
Boredom
Frustration
Hopelessness
Confusion

Figure 1: Activity 1 based on Pekrun (2006) and Pekrun et al. (2017)

The second activity (Fig. 2) involves participants categorising the valence (positive or negative) and activation potential of each emotion. This refers to the emotion's ability to motivate or to bring about learning, or to reduce a learner's desire to take action towards learning. This categorisation process gives rise to interesting conversations about what teachers are aiming to achieve in their classroom in terms of affective processes and outcomes. These card sort activities are followed by a conversation about the role of academics in working with emotion, their willingness to do so, and their perceived competency in this.

What are the implications of these emotions for learning and teaching?

		Emotional Valence	
		Positive	**Negative**
Activating Potential	**Activating**		
	Deactivating		

Satisfaction
Hope   Shame
Surprise
Pride
Enjoyment
Anxiety
Relief
Curiosity
Boredom
Frustration
Hopelessness
Confusion

Figure 2: Activity 2 based on Pekrun (2006) and Pekrun et al (2017)

The next phase of this study will involve students in a similar process. In this way the study seeks to re-examine and conceptualise the role of positive and negative, activating and deactivating emotions in learning. In doing so we challenge teachers' and students' existing beliefs about emotion in learning, offer an alternative, more agentic perspective for supporting well-being in university curricula and suggest approaches for navigating this.

Interesting points raised in discussion include:

- The difference between epistemic emotions – confusion and frustration – and their relative potential for activating learning;

- Agreement over the desire to promote learner curiosity, through choice, more time and space, unassessed or pass/fail periods in the curriculum, integration of real-world, post-graduation examples and discovery-based activities. For example, building a sentence with words from an envelope that gradually simulates how genetic data is sequenced;
- How to increase learners' control without overwhelming them, and strategies for helping students appreciate and increase the value of what they are studying, for example the transferability of statistical and programming skills to STEM graduate job roles;
- Asking students to identify what they have enjoyed about their learning that week;
- Scaffolding and repeating novel, uncertain active learning experiences so students can apply lessons learnt and recover from setbacks.

5   Application to educational development

Currently this approach is being used as a research tool, although arguably the group interviews are educationally developmental for the participants and interviewer as they share perspectives on which emotions they and students experience and interpretations of why this might be. Furthermore, teacher participants have recommended that Pekrun's control-value-theory-based activity be used as a tool and process to support conversations amongst academics and with students about emotions involved in learning. This aims to increase emotional reflectiveness and potentially improve well-being. Valuable concepts for exploration through educational development include:

- Emotional disorientation: Sense of confusion involved in transformative learning (Quinlan, 2016);
- Emotional granularity: To exhibit high emotional granularity means individuals recognise many emotional concepts and are emotionally literate. This has a cultural dimension as different languages are able to express different emotion concepts (Barrett, 2017). For example, *Schadenfreude*, the German word meaning pleasure derived from another's misfortune, does not have an English equivalent;
- Emotional contagion: The tendency of people "to take on the emotions displayed by fellow in-group members with whom they interact" (Smith & Mackie, 2018: 418);
- Emotional acculturation: The process of one's emotions becoming attuned to a new cultural context as you are exposed to and acquire new, local emotion concepts (Barrett, 2017).

6   Conclusions

We hope to have offered educational developers and academic colleagues a way of conceptualising emotion in learning and teaching. We have presented a conceptual framework and process for facilitating conversations and identifying strategies to work with emotions as pedagogical tools. We hope this, in turn, has a positive impact on students', teachers' and graduates' well-being and enjoyment of the curriculum.

Acknowledgements

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