Conceptualising emotion in research on teaching and learning in higher education

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Abstract

There has been a rapid increase in research attention to emotional experiences in higher education in the past 10 years. However, research on emotion in education remains under-theorised. Existing theories (and their related literatures) are scattered in pockets in various disciplines and research groups operating in different countries, focusing on different levels of education. Operating within separate silos, there is little cross-fertilisation or dialogue between disparate perspectives. This synthetic review is intended to advance the theoretical discourse in the emerging subfield of emotions in higher education by presenting six different conceptual stances toward the role of emotion in learning and teaching in higher education. Arising from a wide-ranging review of the literature, these six illustrative stances, each with different educational implications, are drawn broadly from educational and positive psychology, sociology, cultural theory, and transformative learning theory.

Overview

Education is an inherently holistic experience – one that involves both our intellect and our feelings. However, the emotional experiences of higher education are underexplored. Following Cartesian dualism, higher education has traditionally privileged rationality in opposition to emotion (Leathwood & Hey, 2009; Beard et al, 2007).

However, a variety of fields, including philosophy, cognitive science, cultural studies, sociology, politics, neuroscience, and education now embrace an integrated view of cognition and emotion. Although different disciplines and theorists conceptualise emotion differently, there is general agreement that we can no longer separate feeling from thinking.

Increasing attention to emotional experiences in higher education is evidenced by a search on those terms in the British Education Index. From a baseline of near zero, there is a jump in 2006 with about 8 publications per year, rising to over 30 citations per year in 2011 and 2012. However, although emotions are being increasing acknowledged by researchers, emotion tends to be under-theorised.

Existing literature is scattered across a variety of disciplines and countries with little cross-fertilisation between silo-ed research traditions. This paper synthesises key conceptualisations in order to advance theory in this emerging subfield. Based on a wide-ranging review of literature, I briefly characterise six different stances on the role of emotion in education, highlighting key authors and assumptions for each stance.

Six Stances on the Role of Emotion in Education

1) *Emotionalising education is an unwelcome spread of therapeutic culture*

Some authors criticise what they characterise as therapeutic approaches to education (Ecclestone, 2004; Furedi, 2004). Furedi (2004) perceives a rise in a "therapeutic" ethos in Anglo-American society, causing normal difficult life events (e.g. grieving, separation from loved ones, anxiety) to be reframed in terms of emotional deficit. Therapeutic culture is presented as pervading many aspects of American and British culture, including education,

justice, politics and work. Education has become overly concerned with reducing stress, teaching people to cope with life, and promoting a diminished self - one portrayed as weak, feeble and in need of constant counselling.

2) *We should help students (and teachers) develop emotional intelligence so they are able to regulate and manage their own emotions more effectively.*

Goleman (1996) presents emotional intelligence as a) a set of desirable personal skills related to knowing oneself, managing oneself, motivating oneself and; b) as social skills related to understanding others and their feelings and managing responses to others' emotions. He argues that emotional intelligence is more important to success in life than traditional concepts of intelligence, and that it can be taught. A meta-analysis shows that school children who participate in social emotional learning programmes demonstrated significantly better social and emotional skills, attitudes, behaviour, and academic performance than students in control groups. (Durlak et al, 2011).

3) *Students' (and teachers') emotions can (and should) be interrogated and critiqued as socio-cultural phenomenon.*

A sociological perspective views emotions as socio-cultural phenomena that are historically constructed and reproduced by schools, universities and other social institutions. Sub-populations can perpetuate in-groups and out-groups through hatred, fear and distrust, creating powerful barriers to equality and peaceful relations (Ahmed, 2004). Adopting "pedagogies of discomfort" (Boler, 2004) in which students become aware of, question and re-story their own feelings may be the key to addressing racism, sexism and the associated cultural politics of emotion (Ahmed, 2004). Emotions, as social constructs that are manipulated by those in power, demand critical analysis and awareness-raising about these processes.

4) *Emotional disorientation can catalyse changes in perspectives. It is a natural and necessary part of the learning process.*

Some theories of adult development acknowledge the emotional challenges associated with transforming one's world views, an experience that often accompanies the criticality cultivated in higher education, particularly emancipatory or radical education. Mezirow (2009) theorises emotional discomfort as a catalyst for transformative student learning. Disorienting experiences destabilise students enough for them to (re-)analyse a situation, a necessary step in changing their frames of reference. This theory is invoked in numerous examples of students' emotional experiences in higher education (e.g. case studies in Mezirow & Taylor, 2009; Wright & Hodge, 2012) and elaborated by other writers (e.g. Dirkx, 2008).

5) *Emotions are the result of appraisals related to our goals.*

Human action is seen as goal-directed. Linnenbrink (2006) explains that goals underpin our thinking, action and emotions and, therefore, are central to linking cognition, motivation and emotion in educational psychology. Emotions are theorised as arising from judgments about how successful we are in achieving our goals, how important those goals are, how much we feel in control, and how able we feel to handle problems that might arise (e.g. Pekrun et al, 2007). These theories emphasise achievement goals, though other researchers (Strayhorn, 2012; Weiner, 2007) have highlighted social goals such as belonging.

6) *Positive emotions are evolutionarily adaptive (and central to education) because they broaden the range of thoughts and actions that come to mind and build personal resources that last beyond the momentary emotional state.*

Positive psychology focuses on understanding and fostering human flourishing (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). While positive emotions can be seen as desirable in their own right, Fredrickson has developed and tested a "broad and build theory" of positive emotions (2001). Empirical evidence suggests that positive emotions trigger an "upward spiral", such that positive emotions predict the ability to see alternatives, to step back from situations and see them more objectively and, generally, to engage in broad-minded coping. Such broad-minded coping also predicts positive emotions, creating enduring effects on both thinking and feeling (Fredrickson & Joiner, 2002).

Conclusion

Each stance has different implications for curricula, teaching and learning. Some stances have particular implications for the conference theme of embracing plurality and difference. To advance inquiry in this new area, researchers need to engage critically with prior claims about the role of emotions. Rather than simply reporting emotional experiences, more attention should be paid to underlying assumptions about emotions and their role in education, theorising emotions, and considering the implications of research findings in light of conflicting stances.

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