

Emotional regulation in university teaching: a theoretical analysis of two case studies

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Abstract

Although teaching is emotionally demanding, teachers' emotions and emotional development are under-researched and under-theorised, particularly in higher education. This paper draws on Gross' (2001) process model of emotion regulation to analyse two case studies of university teachers' use of emotion regulation in teaching. Gross' model emphasizes five points along a timeline of emotion generation during which adults can regulate their emotional responses. The case studies contrast reappraisal processes with emotional suppression, but also open discussions of the three other emotion regulation processes in his model. Implications for research, teaching and educational development are highlighted.

Proposal

Teaching is cognitively, emotionally and socially demanding. Yet there is little research on the emotional experiences or development of teachers. Hargreaves (1998) summarises four key points from the literature on schoolteachers' emotional relationships with their students:

- “1. Teaching is an *emotional practice*.
2. Teaching and learning involve *emotional understanding*.
3. Teaching is a form of *emotional labour*.
4. Teachers' emotions are inseparable from their *moral purposes* and their ability to achieve those purposes.” (Hargreaves, 1998, p. 838)

Hargreaves (1998) interviewed teachers who spoke passionately about their love of children and desire to create emotional climates that help students learn, and grow. They were motivated by rewarding relationships with children. With a few exceptions (Noddings, 1984; Goldstein, 2004; Schutz & Zembylas, 2009), this moral imperative of “working with young people and watching them grow” is a neglected aspect of teacher education and research on teachers (Martin, 2004; Sutton, 2007; Liljstrom et al, 2007).

However, academics are different from schoolteachers. Tenured professors in research universities wax lyrical about what Neumann (2009) calls “passionate thought.” Professors are deeply engaged with their subject matter, carrying

powerful memories of early engagements with subjects that hold enduring fascination. They experience occasional peak moments of flow in their scholarship, described as exciting, exhilarating, obsessive and beautiful. These emotions are experienced in solitary scholarship or as a shared experience with colleagues and students.

Excitement in the classroom surfaces when students and teachers alike are making new connections and discoveries about the subject matter. With professors, then, their moral imperative is linked with scholarly learning: the extension, reformation, re-contextualisation and representation of particular subject matters (Neumann, 2009).

Nonetheless, much higher education teaching involves interactions with students who are novices to the fields or who have more instrumental goals. Academics may experience distress – rather than passionate thought – during teaching/learning interactions with students whose expectations and goals do not match theirs (Lahtinen, 2008). Thus, they may share many of the emotional labours of self-regulation that secondary school teachers face (Lijstrom et al, 2007; Palmer, 1997).

Existing research on teachers in higher education shows that positive emotions associated with teaching correlate with the use of student-centred learning methods that, in turn, facilitate students' deeper engagement with their studies (Postareff & Lindblom-Ylänne, 2011). Kordts-Freudinger (2014) has applied Gross' (2001) process model of emotion regulation to explain why positive emotions are associated with learning-oriented teaching methods. In particular, he examines two key elements of Gross' model: reappraisal and suppression.

According to Gross' (2001), adults regulate their emotions at five points along a timeline of emotion generation. Four of these points are prior to the emotional response itself, while the last (*suppression*) occurs as a way of modulating the expression of emotional responses already being felt. The first four points include a) *selecting the situation* (avoiding negative situations or deliberately choosing happier situations); b) *modifying the situation* once you are in it; c) *focusing attention* on particular aspects; and d) *reappraisal*, in which one takes a different perspective on a situation or event, attaching different meanings to it, with different emotional consequences. Once the emotion is triggered, *suppression* may be used to regulate its behavioural expression.

Thus adults consciously (and unconsciously) think and act to manipulate situations, the focus of their attention, and the meaning they attach to events, as well as modulating their emotion responses once they happen. Existing research (e.g. Gross & John, 2003; Gross et al, 2006) focuses on reappraisal and

suppression processes and demonstrates that, generally, reappraisal is associated with better social, cognitive, emotional and health outcomes (Gross et al, 2006).

Applying this model to research on teaching, re-appraisal (rather than suppression) is associated with learning-oriented teaching methods (Kordts-Freudinger, 2014). Related research on positive emotions suggests that positive emotions trigger an upward spiral, with positive emotions creating conditions for more effective reappraisal, which in turn lead to more positive emotions (Fredrickson, 2001; Fredrickson & Branigan, 2005).

I apply Gross' process model of emotion regulation to two case examples of university teachers' emotions. These two examples are drawn from a larger project that sought to capture the emotional experience of teaching or learning in higher education. I sought out and solicited more than 200 case studies written as poems. Poetic case studies were used because good poetry opens interpretive options, connects author and reader, and creates a lived, emotional experience in the reader. Padel invokes the famous English poet, Philip Larkin, to elucidate the emotional dimensions of poetry:

A poem can express deep, significant feeling and thought more concentratedly and lastingly than anything else. Poems move you – that's what they are for. Larkin also said poetry begins with emotion in the poet, ends with the same emotion in the reader, and the poem is the instrument that puts it there.” (Padel, 2002, p. 18).

Thus the larger project stretches the boundaries of arts-based inquiry and poetic inquiry (Prendergast, 2009; Prendergast et al, 2009) into “post-qualitative research” (Lather & St. Pierre, 2013).

In this paper, I analyse two contrasting case studies (poems) through Gross' theoretical lens to highlight emotion regulation processes in teaching. One case study, entitled “No Offense...” by Bridget Dixon, illustrates the process of suppression in a racially charged classroom discussion. That case also highlights why some teachers might choose “situation selection” processes or “situation modification” processes to regulate their own emotional experience of teaching by avoiding or shutting down difficult dialogues. The second example, entitled “Weekend Plans” by David Holper exemplifies a creative use of reappraisal.

Implications for research and teaching are explored, including the potential for case-based discussions to highlight to new teachers various emotion regulation processes and help them expand their repertoire of alternative interpretations that could be used in reappraisal processes. Standard textbooks used in teacher

development programmes in higher education overlook emotional aspects of teaching (and learning.) Given the link between reappraisal, positive emotions and learning-centred teaching methods, emotion regulation warrants further attention both in research and educational development.

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