

## Emotions at the Heart: Designing Human Centred Learning Environments in Higher Education

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### Research Domains

Learning, teaching and assessment (LTA)

### Abstract

This paper explores the role of learning related emotions—such as curiosity, anxiety, pride, and frustration—in shaping meaningful learning and teaching experiences in higher education. It presents a professional development package designed to help educators recognise and respond to the emotional dimensions of their practice., Grounded in work of Newton (2014, 2016 & 2018) it draws on the theories of transformative learning, relational pedagogy, and emotional design, to offer an approach that supports staff in creating emotionally responsive environments that enhance the quality of thought, engagement and collaboration.

Evaluation of the approach revealed a shift towards more reflective, emotionally attuned teaching and improved confidence in addressing student emotions. By focusing on learning-related emotions - distinct from general wellbeing - this approach offers a practical framework for considering emotions directly within the classroom and within a range of subject areas to create resilient, and emotionally literate learners.

### Full paper

In a higher education sector increasingly shaped by metrics, automation, and performative accountability, the emotional dimensions of academic life, for students and for staff, are often overlooked. Yet it is these dimensions - how we feel when we teach, learn, succeed, or struggle - that often have the greatest resonance. Far from being peripheral, emotions shape and sustain the educational experience - they are integral to both learning and teaching. Here we explore the findings and potential of a multi-phase Educational Design Research (EDR) project that developed and evaluated a professional development toolkit designed to embed emotional awareness into academic practice.

This professional development approach is grounded in the understanding that emotion and cognition are not separate domains. Newton (2018) notes that we need to move beyond rationalist models of education and instead recognise that 'emotion shapes the landscape we think in'. Whilst Immordino-Yang and Damasio (2007) demonstrate that emotion is essential to memory, attention, and decision-making. Despite this, academic emotions - such as anxiety, curiosity, pride, and frustration - are often marginalised in educational contexts where they are treated as private experiences, ancillary to learning rather than integral to academic development.

The professional development presented here was designed to support educators in recognising, planning for, and responding to the emotional dimensions of their academic work in higher education. It draws on transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 2000), relational pedagogy (Bovill, 2020), and emotional design (Plass et al., 2013), and has been iteratively tested, in practice, with academic staff across a range of disciplines. The training encourages educators to reflect on their own emotional experiences, develop strategies for managing emotional labour, and design learning environments that are emotionally as well as cognitively responsive.

Evaluation of the training, using the Kirkpatrick model, revealed that participants experienced a shift from reactive, instinctive responses to more deliberate and reflective approaches to emotion in teaching. Many reported increased confidence in addressing student emotions, improved classroom dynamics, and a greater sense of alignment between their pedagogical values and practices. The training also provided a shared vocabulary for discussing emotions in professional educational contexts, giving weight to a concern that is too often side-lined and offering a frame to support open discussion between members of staff and their students.

A key focus of this professional development is to foreground a consideration of learning related emotions in a way that is distinct from the wider general wellbeing discourses prevalent within higher education. While institutional strategies often address mental health through pastoral support, the emotional experiences that arise specifically from academic tasks (such as assessment anxiety, intellectual risk-taking, performance related emotions or the emotional impact of feedback) are rarely addressed, or managed, systematically within learning itself. By focusing on these emotions, the toolkit offers a framework for supporting learning in a way that is both meets the needs of high-level learning and is emotionally attuned.

Looking ahead these approaches may positively contribute to emerging conversations about the future of teaching in AI-enhanced educational settings. Newton (2014) highlights the importance of strengthening existing practice by focusing on the relational and emotional dimensions of learning; areas that are uniquely human and resistant to automation. AI can increasingly support direct instruction in learning, but replicating the nuanced emotional understanding, empathy, and reflective judgement that underpin

effective teaching is much more complex. The professional development approach presented here offers some practical strategies to help educators cultivate durable human qualities directly within learning. It focuses on embedding emotional awareness into academic practice, supporting the development of learning environments that are emotionally responsive and foster collaboration. Enhancing the role of educators in shaping reflective and emotionally literate learners who are equipped to navigate change.

This research offers a research-informed, practice-based approach to embedding compassion and collegiality directly within learning in higher education (Irving-Walton, Newton & Newton, 2024). It challenges deficit narratives that portray universities as emotionally detached or socially disconnected, and instead presents them as communities where emotional experience is recognised, supported, and valued. The theoretical foundations of the toolkit will be shared, key findings from its evaluation will be explored, and some practical strategies for embedding emotional competence in academic practice will be offered.

This research suggests that centralising learning related emotions is essential for the creation of compassionate, collegial, and inclusive higher education environments. It offers a practical, evidence-based approach to embedding emotional competence in teaching and makes the case for moving away from perspectives that see emotions as separate from or secondary to the work of learning and teaching itself.