The Interplay of Emotions and Learning;
Towards a Positive Learning Environment

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Abstract

In the symphony of learning, emotions provide the vibrant notes that give depth and richness to the educational experience. Understanding and harnessing the link between emotions and learning allows educators to create harmonious environments that optimize engagement, motivation, and memory retention. By embracing emotions as an integral part of the learning process, educators and learners alike can master the inner symphony, unlocking the full potential of education and fostering a lifelong love for learning. This paper delves into the intricate relationship between emotions and learning, exploring how emotional experiences can orchestrate and harmonize cognitive processes to optimize educational outcomes. It also places emphasis on the integral role of teachers in recognizing the link between emotions and learning and to integrate it into their teaching methodology to bring about a transformative learning experience for students.

Introduction

In the vast symphony of human experience, emotions play a powerful role in shaping our thoughts, actions, and overall well-being. Beyond mere fleeting sensations, emotions have been increasingly recognized as influential factors in the process of learning. One significant aspect of the emotions-learning nexus lies in the formation and retrieval of memories. When an event is emotionally charged, whether positive or negative, the associated information is more likely to be encoded and retained. This phenomenon, known as emotional memory enhancement, can be harnessed to create meaningful and impactful learning experiences. Emotions also play a crucial role in driving motivation and emotional engagement in the learning process. Positive emotions can fuel intrinsic motivation, enabling learners to become self-driven seekers of knowledge. A joyful learning environment that celebrates progress and acknowledges effort nurtures a sense of competence and autonomy, fostering a lifelong love for learning. Within such a premise, the paper seeks to establish the role of emotions in learning and propose a framework which can be used by teachers to impact a positive learning environment which can be conducive for effective learning.

Understanding emotions

Etymologically, the word emotion comes from the Latin word *emovere* which means 'to move' or 'to move away'. In this term, emotions may

be defined as *"the tendency to act based on the feelings the person is experiencing"* (Beard and Wilson, 2010). McDougall (1949) defines emotion as "an affective experience that one undergoes during an instinctive excitement. For example, when a child perceives a bull coming towards him (cognition) he experiences an affective experience in the form of the arousal of the emotion of fear and consequently tries to run away (conative aspect of one's behaviour)". He also discovered 14 basic instincts and stated that every emotion is the product of some instinctive behaviour. For instance, flight or escape is accompanied by the emotion of fear, pugnacity or combat is accompanied by the emotion of anger, submission is accompanied by negative self-feeling, laughter by amusement etc. This understanding of emotion implies that emotions are central to behaviours and behavioural changes or in other words it brings to light the regulatory power of emotions on the human behaviour. Having understood the role of emotions in shaping personalities and behaviours, it may be safe to state that the role of emotions in pedagogy is significant. This paper is an attempt at establishing the link between emotions and learning.

The Interplay of Emotions and Learning

Emotions are not separate entities from the learning process; instead, they form an integral part of it. The learning atmosphere becomes the major concern as one considers effective and healthy learning. Besides the physical factors like infrastructure and hygiene the psychological aspect of the learning atmosphere also deserves major attention. Learning is more effective when the learners are enjoying. Research has revealed that emotions influence attention, motivation, memory formation, and decision-making which are the key components of effective learning. Positive

emotions, such as curiosity, excitement, and joy, have been found to enhance engagement, focus, and information retention. They ignite a sense of intrinsic motivation, allowing learners to embrace challenges and explore new horizons.

Conversely, negative emotions, such as anxiety or frustration, can hinder cognitive performance, impede memory consolidation, and diminish overall learning outcomes. A learning atmosphere charged with negative emotions is in many ways the biggest hindrance to learning. The learners in a state of negative emotions are handicapped and cannot learn. Positive emotions can boost motivation and negative emotion can drain out motivation. Therefore, it becomes important for the teachers to create channels for positive emotions in the learners. This also implies that there should be a willingness or readiness to learn. In support of this perspective, Beard and Wilson (2010) observes that emotion is inextricably linked to learning and states; *"for learning to occur and an opportunity for learning not to be rejected, there has to be an attitudinal disposition towards the event"*. They emphasised on the role of emotion or the affective domain as "the underlying foundation for all learning". According to them the primary emotions are aggression, boredom, hope, rejection, sadness and fear. Among these primary emotions, they pointed out that 'fear' is one of the primary emotions that have an important impact on learning.

To support this perspective, they listed the works of writers such as Gray (1999) who pointed out that there is an emerging literature on the negative aspects of fear-based parenting, citing evidence that young people, in these climates are likely to self-destruct and Fineman (1997) who also brought to light the works of many influential writers on the subject of the debilitating nature that anxiety, fear and stress

have in interfering with learning. They based their theory of learning on prior experience stating that the past consists of banked emotional experiences which can both drive forward and restrict new learning. This implies that educators should seek to provide the right learning experience as the kind of emotional experience either negative or positive will influence the degree and type of learning. In this context Postle (1993, p. 37) describes three kinds of negative learning experience that can have negative impact on learning:

1. Omitted Learning- lack of love in an upbringing, which results in a person being unable to receive or give love

2. Distorted Learning- Can Occur when a person is told that he or she is hopeless, not talented, etc.

3. Distressed Learning- learning that occurs with distress in the form of forced learning and compliance.

Such negative emotional learning experiences can inhibit both present and future learning. Further, it has a significant influence in one's outlook of life, the interaction with one's own experiences and also with others. In the same light Alan Mortiboys (2005) also says that *"if the emotional environment is wrong then learning will become a struggle"* while stressing the importance of creating and planning the right emotional environment for learning. He states that if the emotional environment is dominated by negative emotions such as 'annoyed', 'frustration', 'impatient', 'anger', 'excluded', 'depressed', 'alienation', 'resentment', 'humiliated', 'intimidated' then the brain switches into the 'fight or flight mode' and physiological processes are activated which restrict the functions in the brain that assist learning.

Review of Related Studies

Having stated the above, this section of the paper presents a review of some studies that further strengthen the link between emotions and learning. It may first be stated that there is growing body of research in recent years that supports the integral role of emotions in the contexts of learning. In a study conducted by Gaeta et al. (2021), the researchers contended that positive emotions need to be nurtured because they expand individuals' intellectual, physical and social resources, increasing the reserves they can draw when challenges or opportunities occur in learning. In a previous study, Pekrun et al. (2002), the positive emotions have been established as having a significant role in drawing students' attention to learning tasks and facilitate the use of flexible learning strategies such as elaboration, critical thinking and metacognition. In a later study, the researchers further established that the positive emotions such as willingness to learn and enjoyment, positively related to motivation, effort, learning self-regulation and academic performance (Pekrun et al. 2007).

Negative emotions such as boredom on the other hand were found to be significant in reducing persistence, effort, intrinsic motivation and attention and promote shallow information processing methods (Pekrun et al., 2007). This can be supplemented by the study conducted by Cho and Heron (2015) which found that the negative emotions negatively relate to students' learning strategies such as elaboration, metacognitive self-regulation and critical thinking. According to these researchers, students experiencing such negative emotions spend their cognitive resources on irrelevant thoughts which can decrease their concentration leading to poor academic performance.

Towards a positive learning environment

The sections above have attempted at establishing a link between emotions and learning while placing emphasis on how negative emotions can hinder effective learning. The following presents some possible ways in which the teacher can create a positive learning environment within the classroom to enable effective learning;

a) **Teacher Talk**

Teacher talk may be defined as the language in the classroom that takes up a major portion of class time in giving directions, explaining activities and checking students understanding. Scholars have pointed out that teacher talk makes up around 70% of classroom language (Cook, 2000: Chaudron, 1988). It may be noted that according to pedagogical theory the language that teachers use in the classroom determines to a large degree whether a class can succeed or not and therefore, "teachers should monitor and evaluate their own language, not only as an essential input to learners, but also as social lubricant that keeps the pedagogical wheels turning" (Poppi, 2005). This implies that the teachers talk is crucial, the manner in which they use the language while assigning tasks or giving feedback is important as it will determine the kind of response that is elicited from the learners. Teacher talk is one chief agent that can heighten or disrupt the learning atmosphere. According to Thomas (1987), there are many factors that shape the emotional environment of learning and one of the most important is the language that the teachers use. He goes on to say that the language that the teachers use at the beginning of a session may be the most crucial as it sets the tone. The teacher talk imbued with positive emotions is effective in encouraging and motivating the learners and this imbuement with positive emotions can be achieved by the choice of words that the teachers use. The teachers should monitor their language and frame it in such a way that it does not intensify the learners' negative emotions, instead it should attempt at allaying it. This can be further illustrated by an example: a learner who has internal fears is unable to give a suitable answer to the teacher and the teacher says, *'You cannot answer even a simple question? How did you even get a seat in this class?'* Such a verbal behaviour would intensify the learners' fear and anxieties and in later life he will be inhibited in responding for fear of receiving such feedbacks again. Teacher talks of this nature, devoid of any understanding of learners should be avoided.

b) **Assignments and Materials-**

Assignments and materials can play a significant role in impacting positive emotions in students. If the assignments are beyond the comprehension of the students, they either choose avoidance or find an alternative route both of which obstructs learning. Teachers need to be aware of the importance of adapting materials as well as designing assignments in motivating students. The creation of materials and assignments must be based on what makes students motivated and interested to learn. According to Andmaerh A. E. (1994), students tend to exhibit the failure syndrome at early signs of difficulty. Teachers should therefore provide clear and concise instructions for assignments, ensuring that students understand what is expected of them. Clear expectations reduce confusion and anxiety, allowing students to focus on the task at hand. The assignments and materials that are

used should have real-world connections or personal relevance to students' lives because when students see the value and significance of what they are learning, it can generate a sense of purpose and intrinsic motivation, leading to positive emotions. Teachers should also offer students with choices within the assignments, such as selecting topics, formats, or approaches as allowing students to have some autonomy and ownership over their learning would promote a sense of control and empowerment, which can foster positive emotions. Further, incorporating a variety of instructional materials and formats, such as multimedia resources, interactive activities, or hands-on projects can greatly trigger positive emotions in the students. Engaging and interactive assignments help maintain student interest, enhance motivation, and evoke positive emotions. Providing opportunities for students to work together collaborate, and share ideas can also impact positive emotions. Cooperative assignments encourage teamwork, social interaction, and a sense of belonging, leading to positive emotions.

c) **Assessment and Evaluation**

Assessment and evaluation play a crucial role in shaping students' learning experiences and emotions. Examinations or assessments for grades have a negative connotation when learners view it as exclusively grade determiners. The assessment strategies generally induce anxiety and fear among students which according to Hembree (1988) would cause poor performance. Millet et al. (2006) stated that performance anxiety related to examinations and assessment strategies could negatively impact students' future career paths if it is not minimised. In this light, it may be stated that the search for effective strategies for mitigating assessment related anxiety should be an educational priority. The use of alternative assessment such as self-assessment, collaborative assessment, project-based assessment and technology based should be considered.

Implications on the role of teachers

Based on the discussion above, the most important implication that emerges is the central importance of the teachers in orchestrating a positive learning environment which involves thoughtful consideration of teacher communication, assignment design, and assessment practices. Teachers who prioritize emotional well-being and engage in strategies to promote positive emotions can greatly enhance the overall learning experience for their students. This, in turn, leads to improved engagement, motivation, and ultimately, better educational outcomes.

Teachers play a pivotal role in shaping the emotional climate of the classroom. They should be skilled in using positive and constructive language, providing encouragement, and offering constructive feedback. Effective communication also involves active listening, where teachers understand students' concerns and feelings. Teachers should also adapt their teaching strategies to cater to individual students' emotional needs. This includes differentiating instruction to accommodate varying levels of comprehension and providing choices within assignments to allow for autonomy and personal relevance. Teaching Materials should be engaging, relevant, and thoughtfully designed to evoke positive emotions. They may also be required to design assessment methods that reduce anxiety and foster a deeper

understanding of the subject matter. Beyond academics, teachers should be attuned to students' well-being. They may need to connect students with appropriate resources, such as counsellors or support services, when emotional challenges or stressors arise.

This implies that teachers should receive training and support in emotional intelligence and empathy. Teachers should engage in ongoing professional development to enhance their skills in creating a positive learning environment. This might include workshops on emotional intelligence, effective communication, and innovative teaching methods. In summary, the implications of creating a positive learning environment highlight the need for teachers to be emotionally aware, effective communicators, adaptable educators, and advocates for students' emotional well-being. Teachers play a central role in shaping the emotional climate of the classroom, and by embracing these implications, they can create environments that optimise student engagement, motivation, and learning outcomes.

Conclusion

A positive learning environment goes beyond physical attributes and encompasses emotional, social, and psychological factors that contribute to a conducive-atmosphere for real learning to take place. It may be stated that students would thrive in a positive learning environment. When they feel safe, respected, and supported, they would be more likely to actively participate, explore new ideas, and take risks in their learning journey. Such an environment would foster a sense of belonging and encourage students to embrace their unique identities and perspectives. With the fear of judgment or failure diminished, students would truly engage in the learning process. When students are surrounded by teachers who believe in their potential and provide constructive feedback, they are more likely to develop a growth mindset. They become motivated to set and pursue meaningful goals, driven by their own intrinsic desire to learn and grow. In conclusion, a positive learning environment has a profound impact on real learning. It fosters motivation, collaboration, curiosity, and emotional well-being, creating an atmosphere where students can truly engage, explore, and grow. By cultivating such an environment, educators and educational institutions can play a vital role in nurturing the intellectual and personal development of every learner.

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