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Eros in the classroom and beyond: cultivating positive emotions for learning, teaching and wellbeing in higher education

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Abstract

In this opinion piece, I argue that positive emotions are so fundamental to the student experience that they deserve a prime place within activities relating to teaching and learning in higher education (HE). Research from the learning and medical sciences demonstrates that positive emotions hold considerable benefits for many factors of fundamental importance for learning, teaching, and employment such as general physical health, cognitive health, and mental health and wellbeing. To support my argument that they should be actively cultivated in learning situations throughout HE, first, I highlight scientific research into the affordances of positive emotions for cognitive health. In this regard, I mention the Higher Education Learning Framework (HELF), a research initiative of the Australian Research Council that was created by synthesising scientific work on effective learning and teaching in HE. I then consider scientific research that is, perhaps, less explored in the context of education. This is the work of Professor Andrew Steptoe and his colleagues from the English Longitudinal Study of Ageing (ELSA) project whose research offers helpful data for HE educators regarding the supportive relationship between positive emotions, mental health, and wellbeing. I end with some practical ideas for cultivating positive emotions in teaching situations to stimulate both positive affect and two aspects of cognition that are crucial for learning: attention and memory.

Keywords: emotions in learning and teaching; affective education; mental health and wellbeing; stress; emotions and cognition.

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Introduction

How often does ‘making my students smile’ feature in the aims and objectives of higher education (HE) session plans? Is ‘surprising my students’ a common strategic objective in curriculum design? In this opinion piece, I present a rationale for why such objectives should feature prominently in learning and teaching (L&T) endeavours. Calls that we recognise the role of positive affect – emotions and feelings – in education are longstanding. Indeed, the title of this piece was inspired by the social activist and educator bell hooks who, in her renowned book *Teaching to transgress: education as a practice of freedom* (1994), highlighted the motivating and indeed liberatory effects for students of bringing ‘eros’ into the classroom over thirty years ago. In her paean to embodied education, hooks champions pedagogies that seek to subvert mind/body splits in education, welcomes critical perspectives that we should ‘think through the body’ and argues that this involves recognising and embracing, for example, the place of desire and passion in teaching and learning (1994, pp.193-194). For hooks, it is when matters related to the body are taken seriously in education that the goals of education to promote student self-actualisation occur: we need to ‘renew our joy in learning’ (1994, vi) as a crucial part of this goal.

Here, I reissue hooks’ call. I argue that, given what we now know about the hugely productive, galvanising effect of positive emotions for core issues in learning and teaching (L&T), it is wholly logical that emotions take centre stage in HE such that the cultivation of positive emotions for learning and wellbeing should be considered a standard learning objective in L&T activities whether in the classroom or beyond it. Since hooks (1994) issued her plea to consider the role of the body in education, much work has been done across the disciplines on different issues relating to embodied education. Researchers in the learning sciences, for example, have sought to elucidate the fundamental role of the emotions in learning and teaching. Such work has been synthesised by colleagues in the Science of Learning Research Centre at the Universities of Queensland and Melbourne who, combining research from the disciplines of education, neuroscience, and psychology with the latest thinking about learning and teaching in higher education, have produced the Higher Education Learning Framework (HELF) (Nugent et al., 2018).

HELF offers a whole-institution model for excellence in learning and teaching (Nugent et al., 2018) and is of interest because of the paucity of institution-wide frameworks in the UK that are systematically informed by learning science and which foreground the embodied aspects of learning (though, notably, the word 'body' still remains rare or absent in educational frameworks). It lists seven main themes and a series of related principles for effective learning and teaching and the third theme in the framework is 'emotions and learning'. As HELF researchers point out, emotions are foundational to learning as they can either hinder or promote learning (Nugent et al., 2018). Emotions, they argue, underpin a variety of issues involved in learning including: motivation and engagement with learning; stress, anxiety, resilience and wellbeing; community-building, co-operative learning, social communication; improved executive functions such as memory and focus; knowledge acquisition and knowledge production, including creative and critical thinking; and academic achievement and outcomes (Nugent et al., 2018).

The general argument from HELF that 'emotions are essential for and fundamental to learning' (Nugent et al., 2018, p.17) is now standard in the learning sciences. It is well established within neuroscientific literature, for example, that we learn 'by feeling' (Burlingame, 2021) or, as a key text in educational neuroscience memorably put it, 'we feel therefore we learn' (Immordino-Lang and Damasio, 2007). Time and again, researchers stress the impact of emotions on the brain and elucidate how they impact on different aspects of cognition (Willis, 2007; Posey, 2018), as summed up by Immordino-Lang and Damasio:

> Aspects of cognition that we recruit most heavily in schools, namely learning, attention, memory, decision making, and social functioning, are both profoundly affected by and subsumed within the processes of emotion; we call these aspects emotional thought (2007, p.3).

It is no wonder, then, that scientists of learning urge educators to take emotions seriously: 'emotional experiences are ubiquitous in nature and important and perhaps even critical in academic settings, as emotion modulates virtually every aspect of cognition' (Tyng et al., 2017, p.1).

The science of the impact of the emotions on learning is well documented in educational literatures, then. What is less well known, perhaps, in terms of the relationship between emotions and learning is their potential impact on health, both physical and psychological. Given that health concerns are high on HE agendas in the UK (how students feel physically and mentally has a great impact on learning), this relationship, I argue, constitutes a further, compelling argument for consciously cultivating positive affect wherever possible within HE.

Student mental health in UK higher education

Student mental health and wellbeing is high on university and academic research agendas across Europe (Riva, Lister and Jeglinska, 2024) and recent reports have only amplified the need for work on mental welfare internationally. The World Happiness Report, for example, notes a decline in the positive outlook traditionally displayed in surveys by those broadly fitting the Generation Z age group (current ages 12–27) (Helliwell et al., 2024).

In the UK, mental health has been called a ‘defining issue within higher education’, especially since the Covid 19 pandemic (UCAS, 2021, p.2), with 80% of HE leaders in L&T deeming student mental health and wellbeing an ‘essential strategic focus’ (Wonkhe and Kortext, 2022, p.7). It has been reported that the number of students declaring a pre-existing mental illness to their university has more than doubled since 2014 (Hughes and Spanner, 2019). Research by *The Tab* involving 4,000 student participants can even conclude that ‘the majority of students live with mental health difficulties’ and that ‘two-fifths of students feel stressed every single day’ (Schifano, 2023). Such reports are cautionary not only because of the impact of negative effect on learning at university, as Schifano points out, ‘students’ mental health difficulties harm their learning’ (2023), but also because of the potential impact on student employability. Work to promote positive mental health is also crucial for student futures: ‘investing in student mental health has long-term benefits that extend into the professional world’ (Oxford CBT, 2024).

The impact of positive emotions on mental health and wellbeing

Given that health-related issues are a prime concern in higher educational institutions (HEIs), a consideration of the research on the impact of positive affect on mental health will now support my point that the cultivation of positive emotions in HE activities would be not just helpful but a vital educational strategy.

Positive emotions such as happiness are frequently promoted by medical bodies and in scientific literature as being beneficial for a range of psychological and physical health issues (Blanchflower and Oswald, 2008; Harvard TH CHAN, 2010; Helliwell et al., 2024; Northwestern Medicine, 2024). Indeed, it is suggested that positive emotions may be 'a protective factor' for health in general and, though further research is required, that they may even contribute to increased longevity (Steptoe, Dockray and Wardle, 2009; Steptoe, Deaton and Stone, 2014; Steptoe, 2019a; 2019b). As my focus here is on the impact of positive emotions on mental health, I lean on the research by Steptoe and his colleagues from the English Longitudinal Study of Ageing (ELSA) project (2024) to argue that bringing momentary experiences of happiness (Steptoe, Wardle and Marmot, 2005) into the average HE day may prove beneficial for student mental health and wellbeing. As Director of ELSA, Professor Steptoe is widely considered to be a world leader on the impact of positive emotions on public health.

If we recall the research from *The Tab* that most students feel stressed on a daily basis, then it is Steptoe and his colleagues' (2019a) research into the impact on a person's stress levels of incorporating moments of happiness throughout one's day that is of greatest note for educators (Steptoe, Wardle and Marmot, 2005). Such work led to Steptoe's claim that the most persuasive research on the impact of emotions on public health comes in relationship to the positive impact even brief moments of happiness can have on stress biomarkers such as the stress hormone cortisol: 'The most consistent evidence relates affective well-being with cortisol output, showing lower cortisol levels and steeper salivary decline over the day [a marker of reduced disease vulnerability] in people reporting greater well-being' (Steptoe, 2019a, p.347).

If self-identifying happy people have less salivary cortisol (Steptoe, Wardle and Marmot, 2005) as their research found, then Steptoe's point that we should 'invest in happiness'

(2019b) would seem to apply to HE. The active construction of momentary experiences of happiness and other positive emotions would be a resource-light part of a whole-university approach to mental health as advocated by the University Mental Health Charter (Hughes and Spanner, 2019).

Cultivating positive emotions for cognition: an example

The types of emotions researchers advocate as being positive for learning are those that provoke pleasurable feelings and these can be generated through different approaches. For example, Eyler (2018) offers a variety of research-informed strategies, including the following:

> 1. Stimulating 'emotional engagement' via activities that build an emotional connection between the students and the material being learned (p.51). This might be through attempts at stimulating curiosity for the subject matter, which, in itself, has been found to impact on participants' levels of dopamine.
> 2. Activities that demonstrate the relevance of the material to students' lives – their futures and their sense of purpose.
> 3. Using humour and amusement (p.53).
> 4. 'Pedagogical caring' (pp.53-54): demonstrating that we care about our students as learners and as human beings is, for Eyler, is the most important strategy for building positive emotions for learning into the classroom.

I asked at the beginning of this piece whether 'making my students smile' features in lesson goals and I now invite readers into my Spanish class to experience a way in which I attempt to do just this. In terms of Eyler's ideas above, the activity demonstrates my attempt at provoking an 'emotional engagement' with the topic I am introducing and to stimulate student curiosity by bringing amusement and humour into class. The class in question is my introduction to the celebrated Spanish painter, Pablo Picasso. I was especially inspired by ideas from educational neuroscientists and scientists of education who argue that building strong emotions into my classroom, such as an element of surprise, would not only spark their curiosity, but provide a learning experience that would

amuse them, heighten their attention and engagement and thereby make the class more memorable (Ackerman, 1992; Kensinger, 2009; Tyng et al., 2017; Nugent at al. 2018).
I begin the class by activating the students' prior knowledge about art with questions such as: Can anyone name a famous painter and/or Hispanic painter? Can anyone name a famous Hispanic painting? I'll then show students a photo of Picasso and ask whether they know what his name is and invite them to write it down. Readers might like to do this themselves. After this has been done, we listen to a video about Picasso's name (there are many on You Tube: see, for example, Eych, 2011) and perhaps even have a go at saying it. Hearing his seemingly unending name usually raises a smile. We wonder whether Picasso himself knew his own name and then move on to find out other 'amazing facts about Spanish artist Picasso', such as how he was once accused of stealing the Mona Lisa (Priestley, 2017), before we learn more about Picasso and begin to analyse his art in earnest.

The simple technique of incorporating a bizarre or surprising story or fact about the subject at hand can be used in any discipline and is a useful way of garnering students' attention at the beginning of a class. At the very least, it might make them smile and, as Steptoe and his colleagues' work has shown us, momentary moments of happiness are an excellent way of lowering stress levels.

Conclusion

My research into the science of learning chimes with my lived experience of 30 years in higher education and confirms my belief that there is not an aspect of learning and teaching that does not involve an emotional response. If we wish to 'renew our joy in learning', then bringing eros into the classroom and beyond (hooks, 1994, vi) by actively placing the cultivation of positive emotions at the centre of L&T strategies and of lecturer training would be an obvious way of doing this. This, as I have argued here, is not only the case because of the impact of positive emotions on learning, but also because of their potential impact on mental health and wellbeing. I end as I began with simple questions to assist the planned incorporation of positive emotions in teaching and learning: have you planned how to make your students smile in your activities? What aspects of your teaching practices serve to embrace the emotional needs of learners?

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