



Developing emotionally intelligent teaching approaches in online distance learning (ODL)

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ABSTRACT

This 'on the horizon' paper discusses the evaluation outcomes of a pilot Emotional Intelligence Skills Training (EIST) workshop, intended as a resource to support teachers' enhancement of student engagement in online distance learning (ODL) settings. Sixteen HE teachers participated in a pilot of a new EIST workshop which explored topics including; 1) recognising and managing emotions in oneself; 2) recognising and managing emotions in others', and 3) using emotion. Evaluation was conducted using focus groups. Feedback revealed that, in addition to raising awareness of the need to better recognise and manage students' emotions in online environments, participants felt that EIST supported the development of more positive relationships with students and enhanced engagement. EIST could play an important role in supporting academic staff to better engage students in ODL settings.

Keywords: Emotional intelligence, online distance learning, engagement, teaching

Introduction

Learning is emotional (Claxton, 1999). For example, learning often involves struggle, frustration, thrill or excitement, as well as the prospect of success or failure (Mortiboys, 2013). Subsequently, the potential for strong feelings is heightened. The ability to read, acknowledge and respond to student feelings, particularly negative ones, is a hallmark of effective teaching, since it supports effective relationship building with students, which may also benefit their engagement (Mortiboys, 2013; Valente, Monteiro, & Lourenço, 2019). This ability is known as 'emotional intelligence' (EI), and is associated with highly effective teachers (Ali, Ali, & Jones, 2017; Kostic-Bobanovic, 2020).

As well as being associated with effective teaching, EI is a key factor in positive mental health and wellbeing (Extremera & Ray, 2016). UK Higher Education (HE) has experienced a burgeoning mental health and wellbeing crisis in recent years, with student mental health referrals up by 500% in the last decade (Thorley, 2017). Furthermore, the current crisis appears to have been exacerbated by the Covid-19 enforced shift to remote, virtual learning. For example, the Office for National Statistics (ONS), and the National Union of Students (NUS), report that more than 50% of UK HE students have disclosed a deterioration in their mental health during the 2020/21 academic year. These surveys highlight the potential negative impact of remote, virtual learning on mental health and wellbeing.

Some studies have reported that effective teacher EI plays a significant role in enhancing student EI (Maamaari & Mjadalani, 2018; Valente et al., 2019). Hence, developing EI skills in teachers may support engagement and subsequent learning, but perhaps also help attenuate some of the mental health and wellbeing problems experienced by students, particularly when engaged in remote virtual learning. Positive correlations between engagement and wellbeing are recently reported (Boulton, Hughes, Kent, Smith, & Williams, 2019), thus enhancements in wellbeing would appear to increase engagement and vice versa, meaning EI could be a powerful tool for teachers from a learning and wellbeing perspective.

This 'on the horizon' paper discusses the evaluation outcomes of a pilot Emotional Intelligence Skills Training (EIST) workshop, intended as a resource to support teachers' enhancement of student engagement in online distance learning (ODL) settings. The central purpose of the pilot was to assess the perceived effectiveness of EIST as an approach to enhancing student engagement in ODL.

The intervention

A pilot EIST workshop was created by the author following a request for support from a community of staff teaching on ODL programmes. Support was requested in relation to enhancing student engagement in ODL settings.

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A request for volunteers to participate in the pilot was placed among staff teaching on ODL programmes in each academic school. Sixteen teaching staff volunteered to participate in the pilot. Each participant was involved in supporting student learning in ODL settings, and represented subject areas including Law, Health Sciences, Technology, and Education. The request for support, and subsequent workshop creation and delivery, took place before the Covid-19 pandemic occurred. However, since ODL delivery, and the delivery methods wrought by Covid-19 both comprise significant remote, virtual learning and teaching elements, the evaluation outcomes of the EIST workshop have relevance to institutional transitions to remote virtual learning caused by Covid-19. For example, ODL and Covid-19 enforced remote virtual learning, both require teachers to overcome the challenge of transactional distance, which is the communicative space between teacher and learner caused by learning remotely online, and which may have implications for student engagement (Quong, Snider, & Early, 2018).

The workshop was delivered using a flipped learning format. For example, one week before attending the workshop, participants received a short (~15 minutes) pre-session screencast. The purpose of the screencast was to prepare participants for the workshop by providing some key EI content and its potential importance to effective teaching. Participants were encouraged to watch the screencast before attending the face-to-face (F2F) aspect of the workshop. The flipped approach was utilised to ensure that the F2F aspect could focus on participant-centred learning through teacher and peer interaction and collaboration, rather than content delivery (Lee, Lim, & Kim, 2017).

The F2F aspect possessed a duration of two hours, and took place in a standard classroom, with tables arranged in a 'banquet style' layout consisting of four round tables, each accommodating up to four participants. Participants were randomly divided into groups of four and allocated to a table. Random allocation to each group was to encourage collaboration across subject areas during the F2F aspect of the workshop. The workshop was delivered by the author. Following the workshop, participants were provided with a self-directed study task to further practice the techniques covered in the F2F aspect of the workshop for the purposes of consolidation.

The workshop explored three broad topics; 1) recognising and managing emotions in oneself; 2) recognising and managing emotions in others', and 3) using emotion. Content and activities for the workshop were taken directly from the *Emotionally Intelligent Teacher Workshop* by Brackett and Katulak (2006).

Topics 1 and 2: Recognising and managing emotions in oneself and others'

To support recognition and management of emotions in oneself and in others', a series of activities were included in the F2F aspect of the workshop focusing on perceptions of emotion. These activities had two purposes; 1) to increase the attention participants paid to their own and others' emotions, and; 2) to enhance participants' abilities to evaluate their own and others' emotions.

Specifically, on a pre-prepared template which was a replica of the *Perception of Teacher Emotion* activity by Brackett and Kataluk (2006), participants retrospectively provided a written account of each of the events that they had experienced over the course of the day before arriving at the workshop, including what they were doing and who else was present. They then recorded the emotions they were feeling in each situation including their strength. Finally, they recorded the perceived feelings of those around them in each situation, including verbal and non-verbal cues that influenced their judgements. The activity was performed according to the instructions of Brackett and Kataluk (2006).

Participants were given a copy of the template to take away following completion of the F2F aspect of the workshop as a self-directed study task. They were asked to complete the template over the course of at least one full day as a means of further developing their ability at focusing attention on, recognising, and evaluating emotions.

Topic 3: Using emotions

To support the use of emotions, activities were included in the F2F aspect of the workshop that; 1) required participants to recognise which types of emotion are most effective in different circumstances; 2) supported them to harness their emotional energy to bring about an optimal emotional state in a given situation.

To facilitate the above, participants were required to document on a second pre-prepared template, which was a replica of the *Use of Teacher Emotion* activity by Brackett and Kataluk (2006), how their teaching environment impacts upon their emotions and subsequent interactions with students. They were then required to list each of the things they currently do to generate certain emotions in themselves and their students.

The final part of the activity involved participants identifying a forthcoming event or activity for which they would like to generate an optimal emotional state in themselves and their students, such as a specific teaching session. This was followed by participants' listing the ways that they could evoke the emotional states they desired in themselves and their students. The activity was performed according to the instructions of Brackett and Kataluk (2006).

Evaluation

One week after completing the workshop, participants were invited to participate in a focus group interview to further evaluate the workshop. Focus groups were used because they provide important information on attitudes, feelings, beliefs and experiences

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of participants, as well as enable exploration of the degree of consensus on a topic (Oates & Alevizou, 2018). All 16 participants participated in the focus group.

Three focus groups were held. Two groups included five workshop participants and the remainder included six, reflecting recommendations that five to eight participants is optimal for focus groups (Oates & Alevizou, 2018). Each interview lasted 60 minutes, though discussions were not time limited. A dialogue approach was used to encourage responses and interaction between participants, (Markova, Linell, Grossen, & Orvig, 2011). Interviews were conducted in semi structured fashion with non-leading facilitation by a designated facilitator (member of the learning and development team). As such, interviews were based around a sequence of primer topics including:

- Awareness of the role of emotions in teaching
- The role of the workshop in raising awareness of emotions in teaching
- The use/benefit of Emotional Intelligence Skills in learning/teaching
- Application of the skills covered in the workshop

The interviews were not recorded. Instead the focus group facilitator and author took notes throughout. Following the interviews, notes were compared and then coded using basic descriptive coding by assigning labels to words and phrases that represented important and recurring ideas. Common themes were extracted from the coded text (Hayes, 2000). Themes were; 1) the workshop served to raise awareness of the need to better recognise and manage emotions in oneself and others' in ODL environments 2) the workshop served to raise awareness of the link between recognising and managing emotions, and relationship building with students; 3) EIST can support enhanced relationships and subsequent engagement with students; 4) EIST training with students could enhance their engagement and wellbeing. Ethical approval for the focus groups was granted according to institutional ethical procedures.

Discussion

Participants reported that the EIST workshop raised awareness of the need to more effectively recognise their own, and their students' emotions when teaching in ODL settings, and this aspect of online teaching and learning has long been poorly understood (Marchand & Gutierrez, 2012). For example, emotion and recognition management was perceived by participants as being of potential importance when developing effective relationships with students, which in turn may support their enhanced engagement in ODL. Subsequently, participants perceived the EIST workshop to be an effective means of developing more positive relationships with students, and the perception was that enhanced relationships with students would in-turn enhance their engagement. Assessing the direct impact of teacher EIST on student engagement was beyond the remit of this pilot evaluation, though some research has suggested that this relationship exists (Nizielski, Hallum, Lopes, & Schütz, 2012; Valente et al., 2019), warranting further investigation.

A potential limitation of the evaluation was that the workshop involved staff teaching on ODL programmes. Consequently, those staff engage with students that have opted to learn in a manner encompassing significant remote, virtual elements. Therefore, ODL students may be better acquainted with, and more responsive to, expectations surrounding remote, virtual learning, such as the need to keep cameras on, and use microphones etc. during synchronous teaching sessions. For example, some participants noted that their students are expected to adhere to 'ground rules' relating to such matters, making the identification of emotional cues easier than in situations where students do not turn on cameras and microphones. In this regard, skills focusing on recognising and managing students' emotions may be less effective in situations in which students cannot be seen or heard, due to the difficulty in identifying and responding to emotional cues. As such, clear and consistent 'ground rules' or guidance for students when learning in remote, virtual settings could be essential to teachers using EI to support engagement.

An important emergent theme, was the perception that EIST with students could be an effective means of supporting their engagement. Some literature supports the potential benefits of EIST for student learning (Brackett & Katulak, 2006; Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011), and so this is a potential avenue worthy of further exploration. A particular focus for EIST with students would be how they can be trained to recognise their own emotional states, and better understand how such states impact upon their engagement and participation in ODL. In addition, EIST could be used to support students in bringing about an optimal emotional state in ODL to support their engagement and resultant learning.

Conclusions

The pilot EIST workshop uncovered a possible need for HE teaching staff to better recognise their own and their students' emotions as a means of building more effective relationships with them in ODL settings, potentially benefitting their engagement. Further experimental work is required to demonstrate whether EIST training in teachers positively impacts upon student engagement. As such, an experimental investigation exploring the influence of teacher EIST on student engagement in ODL settings is currently being planned by the author. EIST in teachers may have limited impact in ODL situations where students do not use cameras or microphones due to an inability to read and respond to emotional cues. Setting clear 'ground rules' may attenuate this

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limitation and the author is currently creating enhanced student guidance for remote, virtual learning. There may be potential for EIST with students as a means of enhancing engagement with ODL. Subsequently, a student-facing EIST workshop is currently being planned by the author, alongside a research study investigating the impact of EIST on engagement and wellbeing in ODL.

Biography

Kevin Merry is an academic development consultant at De Montfort University (DMU) and a DMU Teacher Fellow. An award-winning teacher, Kevin has received accolades for his pioneering approach to ODL via flipped classroom approaches and has become internationally renowned for his work on Universal Design for Learning (UDL).

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