

Teaching emotions in higher education: An emotional rollercoaster

Thomas Rhys Evans & Gail Steptoe-Warren

Emotions are fundamental to understanding many phenomena in psychology; however, there are currently no emotion-specific evidence-based teaching practices. The current study evaluates an innovative new active learning-based teaching activity, designed to provide a structure for discussions around emotion. Small groups of third-year psychology students were asked to produce an annotated design of a theme park that would evoke one of the basic emotions. Following completion of the activity, six interviews were conducted to explore the student's views of the session, and these were subjected to thematic analysis. Results suggest the activity is an unexpected, enjoyable and memorable group experience that has the potential to facilitate understanding of emotions, and thus the self.

Keywords: Teaching emotions; active learning; higher education.

RECOGNITION for the contribution of emotion in the explanation of phenomena is growing in most, if not all, psychological fields. Such is the degree, that some are suggesting psychology has experienced an affective 'revolution' or 'paradigm shift' (Barsade, Brief & Spataro, 2003). Action to acknowledge emotions within teaching practices has been slow however. Emotions infrequently feature within the psychology undergraduate degree curriculum, often only in the form of simple knowledge surrounding Ekman's (1999) basic emotions or the cognitive processing of emotions. This general lack of teaching around emotions may be due to the misconceptions surrounding the field. Many common myths about psychology are widely accepted (Furnham & Hughes, 2014), and emotions often have a 'feminine' or 'soft' stereotype (e.g. Plant et al., 2000). Due to these misconceptions, the teaching and discussions of emotions may be restricted by the responses of bemusement from students (Tafarodi et al., 2012).

Commercialisation of Higher Education, for example, viewing students as customers, is being perceived as increasingly problematic (Molesworth, Nixon & Scullion, 2009), and may also be contributing to the lack of emotion teachings. Mortiboys (2002)

declared emotions as 'inappropriate territory' for Higher Education, potentially due to the aforementioned misconceptions, however, emotions and learning are intricately related, for example, positive emotions facilitate knowledge transfer (Levin et al., 2010). The current authors suggest the denial of the inherent pleasures of intellectual activity (McWilliam, 1996) would be criminal! Emotions and language are the medium through which learning can be realised (Beard, Clegg & Smith, 2007), and as such, emotions are inseparable from learning (Ferro, 1993).

Commercialisation may have also reduced interest in the social or non-economic outcomes of attending Higher Education, for example, understanding and development of compassion (Brookfield, 2002), creativity, and identity (McArthur, 2011; Whiteley, 2012). Students can gain many things from university (Chan, Brown & Ludlow, 2014) however, time is rarely given to build the applicable knowledge or practical skills psychology students expect from such a course (Goedeke & Gibson, 2011). An opportunity has thus been missed, as educational institutions and programmes have not seriously or consistently embraced the teaching of emotions, and the potential for this to facilitate development of valuable

interpersonal and intrapersonal skills (Jaeger, 2003).

Despite the importance for understanding many phenomena, and the potential for developing valuable skills, there is no research on the teaching of emotions for psychology students. The vast majority of articles published surrounding the teaching of emotions are directed towards autistic individuals (e.g. Serret et al., 2014) or those facing other challenges only (Richels et al., 2014). Greater attention is, therefore, needed in the teaching of emotions for all psychology students. As emotional experiences are considered subjective (Anderson, 2015), adopting a teaching approach which encourages sharing of experience may be of greatest value (Pennebaker, Zech & Rimé, 2001). As such, an active-learning approach may be an enjoyable and effective method to facilitate learning of emotion (Freeman et al., 2014; Lumpkin, Achen & Dodd, 2015). Given the increasing diversity in backgrounds of undergraduate cohorts, and the cultural differences in the subjective experience of emotion (Scollon, Koh & Au, 2011), this student-led approach may be especially fruitful in engaging and integrating all members of a diverse psychology cohort (Chang, 2006).

As a timely response to the increasing affective focus in psychology, but lack of evidence-based teaching methods, the current study aims to provide inspiration for the innovative teaching of emotions for all psychology students. The benefits of learning around emotions can go beyond knowledge transfer to the growth of self-awareness and meaningful skill development, and thus deserves greater attention. As active learning appears to be a fitting method to structure this teaching, the current study presents preliminary evidence for the effectiveness of a student-led theme park design activity for facilitating discussions on emotions and their evocation.

Method

In the third week of a 10-week seminar-based emotional intelligence intervention, a theme park design activity was conceptualised to facilitate discussions on the nature, and evocation, of emotions. This student-led active learning-based activity is the focus of the current study. Third-year psychology undergraduate students were asked to get into small groups and choose one of the basic emotions (fear, surprise, contempt, anger, happiness, sadness or disgust). They were then challenged to design a theme park that would evoke only that emotion, and to create an annotated diagram of their design. The activity took roughly 20 minutes, and students presented back their designs to the seminar group to consolidate learning. After the 10 weeks, interviews were conducted with six students (five females, one male; $M=21.83$, $SD=1.17$) to evaluate the whole intervention to determine what they felt they gained, what they found interesting, and what they enjoyed. Unprompted, the students' spoke of the aforementioned theme park design activity, and these comments were subjected to thematic analysis to explore the efficacy of the task (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This study was conducted in line with the British Psychological Society guidelines and had received ethical approval from our University Ethics Board before data collection began.

Results

Feedback from all tutors suggested the students actively engaged with the activity, and that it provided an effective springboard for discussions on the nature and evocation of emotions. Thirty-nine annotated diagrams were retained with permission, and provided unique insights into the engagement with the activity. Many students challenged themselves to engage with some of the emotions less relatable to theme parks, and presented innovative ways in which they could evoke them, for example, anger by towing cars whilst in the park. Many groups (38 per cent) explored fear, most of which incorpo-

rated personal phobias or media representations of fear, for example, torture. Other popular options were surprise (23 per cent) and happiness (18 per cent); notably, no group designed a contempt-based theme park.

Within the interviews conducted with the students after the intervention, four themes of discourse about the task were extracted. The first theme derived was that of memorability: 'The theme park one was the most memorable for me'. Despite the students engaging in a wide range of innovative activities over an intense 10-week period, many recalled the theme park activity, and saw it as a distinct and positive experience: 'It made the session memorable and it made it fun'.

Fun itself was the second theme arising from the interviews, as many students elaborated upon their designs in a positive way, proud of their creative thinking: 'I think mainly because we created like a candy world so that was quite fun' and 'There were a lot of good ideas and it was a lot of fun to do'. Many students used words such as 'engaging' and 'awesome' and even the staff members facilitating the session seemed to feel the experience was positive and beneficial. In an unprompted communication, one tutor emailed: 'I genuinely think that the students have enjoyed a good ole dose of what psych should be about – critical self-reflection, self-awareness. etc. I'm hopeful that the students have gotten a lot out of our natters!'

The third theme arising from the interview data suggested that some students found the exercise to be unexpected, and the value or purpose of the activity was questioned: 'I can see sort of why you would do that, but I just... for me I didn't really see the relevance'. For one student, this stemmed from the subjectivity of emotions, viewing this as problematic, opposed to an opportunity for discussion: 'Yeah, I didn't really get that... you were given... erm... you were in groups... was a bit awkward and everybody's view of an emotion is different so, if you have fear of something I'm scared of or fear of maybe different from someone else, so

I think there is a conflict in the underlying reason as to what is an actual emotion'.

Whilst some students may have experienced difficulties in negotiating emotion evocation, the final theme from the data indicated that the activity was an effective method for facilitating teamwork: 'It was interactive and we had to all sit down and brainstorm and decide together, 'OK this is what we gonna' do, this is how we're gonna' design it, this is what fears we want to induce, this is how we want to do it.' So I think it was good because we had to do teamwork'. Some explicitly reported the design of the activity as fundamental to the development of the team, and subsequently to its value: 'Well, sometimes I don't like teamwork, I really don't. And sometimes I just try and get past it. I'm good at teams but if I'm not in the mood, I'm really not in the mood to be in a team. I guess because the task was fun, being in a team was fun. It was quite interesting'.

Discussion

The current study is the first to explore the efficacy of an emotion-based teaching activity for psychology students. The diagrams students produced, observations and communications from tutors, and interviews with students, suggest the theme park design activity was an unexpected yet enjoyable and memorable group experience. Concurrent with the literature surrounding active learning, for example, Lumpkin et al. (2015), the students appeared to have enjoyed and valued their participation, benefiting from the sharing of their experiences (Pennebaker et al., 2001), regardless of emotional or cultural background (Chang, 2006).

The next step in the research agenda is to validate the activity with larger numbers, and in a robust quantitative manner. The activity should be examined further – not just to compare its efficacy in transferring emotion-based knowledge in comparison to traditional methods, although this would be of benefit, but to also explore whether such tasks can have a meaningful impact upon

long-term self-awareness and personal development. Given its brief, practical, and creative nature, the lack of existing methods to facilitate discussions on emotions (Richels et al., 2014; Serret et al., 2014), and the lack of technical or advanced knowledge needed to engage with it, the proposed activity could be of great benefit to students at all levels, not just Higher Education, should its efficacy be confirmed.

Given the increasing interest in emotions for so many areas of psychology (Barsade et al., 2005), the current study is the first step towards a greater range of evidence-based teaching activities that can overcome the 'soft' emotional stereotypes to facilitate a meaningful learning experience (Tafarodi et al., 2012). The current authors hope readers will be inspired by the current study to design, validate, and use further innovative emotion-based teaching activities. Such activities may be helpful in educational contexts, at all levels, by embracing emotions as a more valuable discussion point; potentially as part of the expansion of curriculum to recognise the importance of emotions (Barsade et al., 2005). Such activities could also be used to facilitate more meaningful personal development and emotional growth (Goedeke & Gibson, 2011; Jaeger, 2003), and thus may be of greatest value within Higher Education to counter the negative consequences of commercialisation (Molesworth et al., 2009) and add to the traditional economic outcomes of undergoing an university degree programme (Brookfield, 2002; McArthur, 2011; Whiteley, 2012).

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