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Emotional Intelligence – How do we motivate our students?

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Abstract

As emotions influence learning, the role of a teacher as a facilitator is very important. This paper aims to address a series of issues related to motivating students, by taking into account feelings, relationships and learning styles. The research is mainly descriptive, with examples from my teaching activities in business higher education. By being based especially on observation of classroom activities and behaviour of participants, the study is not meant to prove a particular cause and effect relationship, but rather to highlight a series of links, key questions that appear and methods that generally have better results. As expected, use of emotional intelligence leads to many advantages for the whole educational process. There are also some disadvantages related to the efforts to be put, especially in terms of use of time. However, I strongly believe that a student-centred approach and a better communication with students represent a fundamental key to success in the process of knowledge transfer.

Keywords: Emotional intelligence, knowledge, motivation, business higher education;

1. Main text

Education is a key issue of our lives and therefore a strategic process to be taken into account. The process involves people that should develop in time, by being shaped in an environment in which they feel they belong to (students), and also people that should be able to take responsibility of becoming real “shapers” (professors). The interaction between the two is very important. Motivating students has increasingly become a major concern for educators. In parallel with the increasing preoccupation for motivating students, we can also notice an increase in the use of emotional intelligence, both at conceptual and pragmatic level. It would be certainly difficult to prove a particular cause and effect relationship, but a series of links are evident and this paper aims to address this issue. Emotional intelligence normally influences both the academic results of students and their emotional adjustment in university. It normally makes students more driven to learn. Hence, emotional intelligence means many advantages when used in the educational process.
Sometimes being more emotional intelligent within a whole group implies having quite strong relationships with each member of the group separately. For a teacher, this would mean a real student-centred approach, which for sure is more time-consuming, but might lead to a lot better results. Efforts are certainly higher, but efficiency is as well, since a better communication will lead to greater effects, and the increase in effects is bigger than the increase in efforts.

The study done for this paper is generally based on descriptive research methods (especially observation of classroom activities and behaviour of participants). In terms of thinking about the learning styles, I used a deductive approach, as I used the most well-known taxonomies and then think of my reality in the classroom by taking into account these perspectives. For all the other issues I used an inductive approach, as the starting point was my own contextual perspective.

1. Emotional Intelligence and Impact on the Educational Process

Development of knowledge has been traditionally associated with higher education. However, it is clear that both specialized knowledge and the skills for applying this knowledge in real situations, which are generally a lot more complex, should represent main targets of the educational process. Therefore, communication skills and skills of working in teams are very important (Ramaswamy, Harris and Tschirner, 2001). In business higher education, it would normally mean even more, as teamwork has become a strategic tool for companies’ competitiveness.

However, there are also some authors who consider that teamwork is not used as it should neither in academic nor in corporate thinking (Reich et al, 2009).

Changes in the work market lead to a need for a change in methods of training in order to adapt to the current dynamics. Changes in the external environment represent key drivers for academic institutions’ culture (Grant, Hackney and Edgar, 2010). The authors highlight the need to develop additional and alternative methods for teaching that are more relevant than the traditional lectures or laboratories. There is not any instructional method that might have only advantages, the “art” of professors and trainers being expressed in the choice of a “perfect” mix between them, in which methods flow naturally from one to another.

In fact, each teacher has his/her own preferences for a series of methods. For instance, I do believe that action learning goes better than other methods, since “feeling” implies also doing (and debriefing is very important), not only hearing some thoughts expressed by a specialist, reading a text from a book or seeing a documentary. I do know I have such a preference and I also conducted a study in order to demonstrate that for my courses this method works better (Radu, 2012). Of course, I know that, if other teachers do prefer other methods, their preferred methods would work better for them. The suitability of particular methods and ways of working with students is closely related to the concept of emotional intelligence.

Emotional intelligence can be defined as “the subset of social intelligence that involves the ability to monitor one’s own and others’ feelings and emotions, to discriminate among them and to use this information to guide one’s thinking and actions (Salovey and Mayer, 1990). By comprising four main classes of abilities - perception, integration, understanding and management of emotions - , emotional intelligence is considered “as powerful and at times more powerful than IQ” in predicting success (Goleman, 1995).

As expected, a lack in emotional intelligence leads to a series of problems. Fernández-Berrocal and Ruiz (2008) presented four basic areas in which such behavioural problems among students might appear: interpersonal relationships, psychological well-being, academic performance and disruptive behaviours. Thus, emotional intelligence in education is not only used as a tool for a better educational process, but it might be an objective by itself as well, since emotionally-intelligent students will have a higher value as potential employees and as people in general.

A successful course is one that reveals positive emotions in students. Positive emotions lead to an attraction towards that particular course and also towards education in general. The teacher needs self-control and a good balance between limits and rules, on the one hand, and flexibility and humour, on the other hand.

I did some experiments by splitting the groups into teams that are very competitive, this situation coming also from a cultural Romanian characteristic (we generally tend to like competition). However, I have never encouraged a real competition, in the sense that, even if for a particular activity/game, a particular team was declared as a winner, I also considered important, in each case separately, to point out that every participant is a winner as long as
he / she is leaving the classroom with at least one main idea to be applied in the future. While this is something I consider important and I manage to take it into account in practice, I have to recognize that emotional intelligence is hard to be applied, especially in our educational context, in which we have classes (seminar / workshop / laboratory) with around 30 students and lectures with almost 150 students and the trend is for their number to increase, in order to cut costs, which I do not consider a good long-term strategy. I do believe that a more student-centred approach would be highly appreciated among students and would lead to better educational results.

2. Main Challenges when Teaching Business in a Foreign Language – What should we do?

There are a series of challenges encountered when teaching in another language than the mother tongue, but of course the barriers can be overcome. In order to come with a series of examples, I will particularly refer to my own field, as I teach business in English for both Romanian and international students.

The main challenges that appear when teaching in a foreign language are a mix between some general difficulties teachers of foreign language and those of particular subject (i.e. Business) encounter. Both types of problems appear, as the novelty comes from the two directions (a foreign language and a new field to be analysed). Therefore, it is sometimes difficult for the teacher to explain complex ideas in simple words. It is also difficult to make students understand the main ideas and feel the “pulse” of the class – familiarity with a particular accent (people coming from different parts of the world do have different accents of English), adaptation of PowerPoint slides, classroom techniques. The problems get even higher when the number of students is very big.

There are also some differences in the teaching process in a cross-cultural environment (this type of environment is more likely to appear when teaching in English). Firstly, there are differences in “translating”. Secondly, I could observe some differences between the small groups that tend to form in a class – in many cases, Turkish students are staying more with their Turkish colleagues, the Chinese are staying together, the Russians are staying together and so on. I strongly believe that we should not encourage these groups to be formed, because the differences between them will not lead to important advantages and, moreover, this way, students will lose the real multi-cultural experience. I also noticed some differences in participation, due to the cultural differences. Especially in the case of games or activities such as negotiation, I found Romanians to be more assertive. This might have as a cause both a cultural characteristic and the fact that their number is bigger. No matter the cause, more than in other contexts, I felt the need for a more structured discussion format (turn-taking).

An issue that should be taken into account in any class is the one of learning styles, as it is clear that students are different. The issue becomes even more important when teaching in a foreign language, especially from the perspective of matching teaching styles to learning styles. Learning styles refer to the patterns used for acquiring knowledge.

A well-known (and maybe the first) model of learning is Kolb’s experiential learning theory (Kolb, 1984), by which the process of learning is split into four stages: (1) concrete experience, (2) observation and reflection, (3) forming abstract concepts and (4) testing in new situations. As I mentioned before, I have a tendency to prefer action learning (as part of my teaching style) and therefore I consider this model a present one, even if it was developed about 30 years ago.

The VARK model is very well-known (Fleming, 2001). The author defines learning style as “an individual’s characteristics and preferred ways of gathering, organizing and thinking about information”. Thus, students might have a visual, aural, real/write or kinaesthetic learning style (the acronym comes from the four categories). For instructional purposes, this model is one of the best.

In a study conducted in 2011, Sabeh, Bahous, Bacha and Nabhani found that there was no match between teaching and learning styles (for teachers and students). Rinaldi and Gurung (2008) also suggest that it is better for teachers to enhance learning by using many diverse styles than to strive to match teaching styles to learning styles. Last year I had an experiment with my students in which I proved that action learning as a method of teaching increases the value of the course. The marks obtained for some tests that were part of the continuous assessment and also the marks obtained at the final exams proves the method was correctly applied and it helped. However, at the end of the semester I asked my students what they thought about using action learning as a method to understand and also to introduce new concepts and about 15% of them told that they would have preferred other methods. It is
clear that there is not any recipe of success for all, and a balance is needed in every action.

**Conclusions and Discussion**

As teachers, we do need to permanently motivate our students. Emotional intelligence is not just a concept, but an important element in the educational process. Emotional intelligence helps teachers to motivate students and to shape their behaviour.

Most of the examples I referred to in this paper come from my own experience of teaching business for international students. Therefore, I considered important to talk about the main barriers that should be overcome (a mix between general difficulties teachers of foreign language and those of particular subjects – i.e. Business) have, explaining complex ideas, making students understand the main ideas and feeling the “pulse” of the class – familiarity with a particular accent, PowerPoint slides, classroom assessment techniques).

I also looked at the teaching process from a cross-cultural perspective, as differences between cultures imply a good use of emotional intelligence. There are differences in “translating”, differences between small groups – those small groups that tend to form should not be encouraged –, and there are also differences in participation that ask for a quite structured discussion format (turn-taking systems).

Irrespective of culture, students learn differently, as there are visual, auditory and kinaesthetic learners and the conclusion is that it is better to have a mix of teaching methods. Therefore, by taking into account the interaction between teaching and learning styles, the question if there is any “best” teaching style when teaching business or when teaching in a foreign language remains open.

One of the main limitations of this study is caused by the inductive approach I have used, as it is about my own contextual perspective and, although the temptation might be quite big, I cannot generalize my observations. Further research should follow, in which I intend to use not only a qualitative and a quantitative approach.

**References**