



# Manage the Emotional Needs of Learners in Teaching Sessions

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## Key Ideas

- Emotional responses of learners (expected or unexpected) can affect learning in positive and negative ways
- The psychological wellbeing of learners is paramount
- When planning an educational session, careful consideration should be given to emotional reactions in learners
- In sessions where strong emotions are likely, learners should be made aware of how they will be supported emotionally
- Feedback and reflection should be used to inform the design of future sessions

## Introduction

Emotions influence learning by affecting our thinking, behaviour and memory. Emotional learning attempts to create a caring and engaging learning environment. Giving appropriate consideration to and managing emotions during educational encounters can improve interest and attention, reasoning, problem solving and decision making in learners as well as motivation and energy in the teacher. Emotionally intelligent educators will be able to generate and use emotions, where appropriate, to help learners achieve their learning outcomes. In addition they may have better rapport with learners, enhance emotional health and improve academic and work performance. (Mayer and Savoy 1997).

If strong emotions are generated during or after a teaching session, the memories related to this will have a strong emotional component. Emotional memory is said to be long lasting. If it is linked to sensory input - sound, smell or visual items, the learners may experience a resurgence of the same emotions when the same stimulus is re-applied. There are five core emotions - happiness, sadness, surprise, disgust and fear. Sometimes learners' emotional states can be deliberately manipulated in a variety of ways e.g. using music, games, stories, films etc to enhance the learning. However, it is not uncommon for difficult emotions to be triggered unintentionally and unexpectedly. Some of the emotions could be disruptive to the learning and some could be beneficial. Good teaching and facilitation involves managing and dealing with emotions to enhance learning but also to ensure the psychological wellbeing of the learner. It is the latter that is paramount.

*"You show your group a powerful video of a true story in your teaching session which you believe to be non-threatening and a student in the room has an unexpectedly strong emotional response and leaves the room in a flood of tears . . . WHAT DO YOU DO?"*

On the rare occasions where emotional reactions are more severe, learners may need additional short-term support. It is essential when planning a session that the teacher is able to foresee the potential for strong emotional reactions, including unexpected responses, and ensure that measures to tackle these situations are in place.

## Before the teaching session

In planning the teaching session it is essential to consider what emotional responses are likely or desirable in the session and what potential there is for strong or extreme reactions e.g. scenarios involving breaking bad news; showing films detailing serious untoward events for patients. In addition it is important to consider unexpected emotional responses. Asking oneself key questions may help this process and the processes of developing approaches to managing the emotional responses.

It's useful to ask "How well do I know the learners?". In day to day communication, the degree to which people are familiar with each other is critical in shaping the communication: communication with a close friend is likely to be very different from that in a professional capacity. In educational encounters the teacher may have a good sense of the learners' personalities and patterns of response and behaviour. In addressing emotional needs, it may be possible to predict what may stimulate (intentionally or not) any emotional reaction from specific learners. For example, sensitive students may respond emotionally to a stimulus when others do not. Obviously there may be situations where the teacher does not know the learners at all beforehand and may have to err on the side of caution.

*"Socially and emotionally competent teachers are culturally sensitive, understand that others may have different perspectives than they do, and take this into account in relationships with students,"*  
(Jennings and Greenberg, 2009, p. 495).

In addition, the teacher should ask "What is my relationship with the learners like?" If teaching over a number of sessions or on a course, a good teacher should build and create a good relationship with learners. This may help mitigate against extreme emotional reactions and help the teacher's awareness of the learners' emotional needs. Where a teacher has not been able to establish good relationships, this may make disproportionate emotional responses more likely. A good relationship enhances the way that each side will easily understand other, which is important as mentioned above.

*"Importantly, emotional engagement and understanding [in education] require strong, continuous relationships between teachers and students so they learn to 'read' each other over time."* (Hargreaves, 2000, p. 815).

## During the teaching session

It can be challenging for teachers to have awareness of and address the emotional needs of learners during a teaching session. Emotional responses can be divided into those that emerge and can be observed visibly during the session and those which are not obvious until after the session has finished. It must be remembered that emotional responses vary greatly between and within individuals and may be hard to predict. It is the teacher's responsibility to manage the situation especially where it is identified in planning the session that some of the educational material could evoke, or is specifically intended to invoke, an emotional response from the learner (Jennings and Greenberg 2009). An approach to this would be to warn the learners at the beginning of the session which may work as 'a warning shot'. Re-iterating the warning immediately prior to the emotive content will reinforce the supportive nature of the learning environment. Bearing in mind the different personalities and socio-cultural and professional backgrounds of learners a practical idea could be to leave the door ajar to allow learners to make a quiet exit and avoid drawing attention. Additionally this will give learners sufficient assurance that if they become emotional during the session it is acceptable and there are plans in place to help them overcome their emotions and not to be judged for that.

An alternative approach (which may be advisable when strong emotional responses are known to be likely) would be to have other members of the teaching team who are able to attend

to any learners with emotional reactions during the teaching session. For example when you are signposting your warning shot ensure that you specify where adequate support is available, possibly in another room where students can go to if they become overwhelmed by the content. The advantage here is that the teacher leading the session will be able to maintain the flow of the session and the learner affected will receive immediate emotional support. Students should be made aware of the fact that this colleague is there to offer help to those who need during the session. Whatever the approach, it is advisable that ground-rules are clarified and agreed with the learners.

## After the teaching session

Once the session has been completed it is essential to collate feedback obtained and analyse and reflect on this. Verbal feedback during the session should be summarised and added to information from feedback forms. This may include responses to specific questions regarding educational material with emotive content. However it is also essential to review general comments for emotional reactions that may not have been predicted or seemed incongruous. These may be important pointers to unintended emotional consequences. If there has been a significant emotional reaction by a learner during the session, it may be valuable to conduct a group-reflection session with the organisers of the session, particularly if there is additional information volunteered by the learner. If the session was planned by a single individual it may be desirable to engage in reflection with a peer, particularly if the teacher has been affected emotionally by the experience. The reflective process will help process and resolve some of the residual emotions and will also be crucial in informing future iterations of the teaching session to ensure the optimum management of difficult emotions for learners. A definitive action plan for refining the session may need to be delayed until all relevant information is available e.g. follow-up discussion with learner. In a worst-case scenario, the outcome of complaint investigation would need to be factored in to any action plan and revision of the teaching session.

This paper was produced as a consequence of a group task to produce and reflect on a half day teaching event on interprofessional education as a part requisite of the Cardiff Diploma in Medical Education.

## Further Information

**Jennings, P. A. and Greenberg, M. T.** 2009. *The prosocial classroom: Teacher social and emotional competence in relation to student and classroom outcomes*. Review of educational research 79(1), pp. 491-525.

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