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Borderland Spaces of Partnership: Encountering Emotion in Learning and Enhancing Student Wellbeing

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Introduction

Despite emotion being recognised as fundamental to learning, the affective aspects of learning have often been side-lined in higher education. In the context of rising student wellbeing challenges, supporting students and their emotions in learning is increasingly significant.

Pedagogic partnerships have the potential to help students to recognise and work with their emotions in a positive manner. In this poster, we present an evidence-based model to summarise the potential effect of pedagogic partnerships in enhancing student wellbeing.

Conceptual context: Emotions and wellbeing

Ongoing challenges and increased pressures in higher education have meant that student mental health problems continue to rise internationally (Ferguson, 2017). Academic pressure is cited as the primary cause of stress for students (YouGov, 2016) and this is particularly so with respect to assessment.

Emotions in learning:

- Emotion is fundamental to learning (Felten et al. 2006). To enhance student wellbeing we need to work more closely with the emotional elements of their learning experience i.e. address the 'affective domain'. The affective domain engages students' with their emotions, feelings and values in response to a learning task (Krathwohl et al., 1964).

Student wellbeing:

- We view student wellbeing as an umbrella term that emanates from the achievement of a number of personal attitudes and behaviours. Positive emotions, and self-regulative and self-efficacious behaviours, lead to academic resilience and positive wellbeing (Fredrickson & Joiner, 2002).

Glossary of key terms

Emotions	Emotions are relatively brief and context-specific responses to experiences, objects, or causes (Felten, 2017). They 'structure relations … [and] guide social interactions' (Keltner & Haidt, 1999: 506).
Resilience	The ability of students to adjust to adversity, maintain equilibrium, retain some sense of control over their environment, and continue to move on in a positive manner (Anthony et al., 2017).
Self-efficacy	A person's perception that they have the skill and capability to undertake a particular action or task (Bartimote-Aufflick et al., 2016).
Self-regulation	The ability to control one's behaviour, emotions, or thoughts, appropriate to the given context or situation (Cook & Cook, 2014).
Wellbeing	'A sustainable positive mood and attitude, health, resilience, and satisfaction with self, relationships and experiences' in the educational environment' (DEECD, 2010: 1).

Methods

We present two case studies of student-faculty and student-student pedagogic partnership. The principal investigators of these projects (4 faculty members) were invited to answer the following questions in relation to the life-span of their partnerships:

- how these relationships drew forth positive and/or negative emotions in their students
- whether the emotions evolved over time as the partnership progressed
- whether the emotions intersected with student learning, behaviour and performance over the short or long term
- whether foregrounding emotions through partnership promoted student wellbeing.

The respondents provided written answers to the questions. They drew on direct student testimony (from 150 students), and their personal observations and reflections.

Case Study 1: Student-faculty assessment feedback dialogue (Hill & West, 2019)

Context:

- Examining student emotions and learning behaviours linked to an assessment intervention
- Second year undergraduate physical geography course in a large teaching-oriented British university

Feed-forward Meetings:

- Students choose an essay from a selection
- They write a considered draft of their chosen essay
- They meet face-to-face to discuss the draft with the tutor
- Meetings begin with the tutor asking students if they are 'ready for feedback'
- Meetings focus on performance gap (i.e. areas that are currently weak and need further development)
- Meetings are open and friendly, encouraging collaborative co-learning and candid exchange of ideas through dialogue

Case Study Findings:

- Clear evolution in student emotions over the feed-forward process from negative to positive:

'I was worried when I handed in my draft, because I knew it wasn't brilliant'

'The bit in between my draft and writing the final piece was the best bit because I knew what I was doing and I enjoyed that process of making it better'

- Key was to persuade students they had capabilities that could be developed over time rather than fixed abilities that might limit their achievements.
- The meetings provided a personalised and inclusive learning experience - making the students feel cared for:

'I definitely felt like you cared about what [grade] I was getting'

- Students reported that they altered their behaviour after the meeting, both within-task and with respect to post-assignment self-efficacy and self-regulation:

'I definitely feel more confident … being able to prepare, structure and write in the future. Not only will I now be able to repeat these steps'

'Now, I feel I can evaluate at different stages throughout assessment and therefore make changes'

Case Study 2: Student-led peer teaching during fieldwork (Marvell & Simm, 2018)

Context:

- Fieldwork is a borderland space where traditional power hierarchies and identities can be destabilised (Hill et al., 2016)
- Five day international fieldtrip to Barcelona, Spain
- Students undertake peer-teaching, planning and delivering presentations in the field
- Faculty act as facilitators, offering advice and guidance

Case Study Findings:

- Students were often in a heightened emotional state during the fieldtrip:

'We were all quite nervous about it, because obviously, it is quite daunting the fact that we had such a long presentation, we have all of the factors we don't know what's going to happen when we are out there'

- But for most students, initial apprehension changed to positive feelings once their presentation was finished:

'I loved it … felt it was successful … every question we asked we got an answer, the interaction was really, really good'

- The immersion of students in their learning in the field influenced their affective domain, leading to deeper learning and skills of self-regulation:

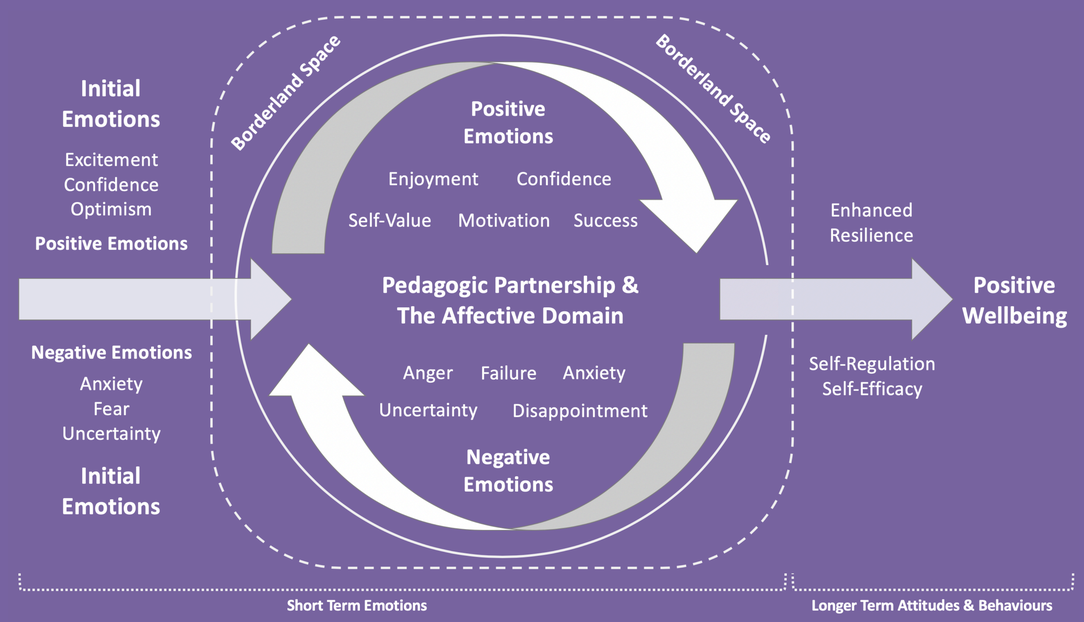
'Every day I was subject to new ways of thinking, feeling and studying about topics… With this deep learning approach, I am able to apply wider theories to my observations, even after the fieldtrip'

- This represents not only an enhanced meta-cognitive awareness of the situated nature and construction of knowledge but heightened emotional sensibilities.
- Some students experienced transformative learning:

'Looking back … before the fieldtrip, I can see how closed-minded I was. I had not anticipated how enlightening the fieldtrip would be, or how much my knowledge and skill range would expand'

Conclusion: Presenting an evidence-based model

- Pedagogic partnership in higher education offers fertile ground to purposefully encounter emotions and empower students to develop positive feelings, attitudes and learning behaviours, making them more resilient.
- Transformation comes through the cognitive and emotional joys and struggles of learning in borderland spaces of partnership.



Practical advice to support staff:

- Relate to students in ways that are welcoming, hospitable and attuned to them as individuals
- Adopt active student-centred and social pedagogic approaches such as fieldwork, group work, inquiry-based learning and authentic assessment
- Seek training from institutional Educational Developers to work positively with the emotional aspects of learning
- Learn from one another through co-teaching, gaining support and learning, or simply sharing the emotional labour of teaching

We recognise that this type of practice may not be for everyone, but by ignoring the emotions that are intrinsic within and shape learning, we threaten to limit our students' learning experiences and achievements. Working in partnership to collaboratively develop our students' positive feelings, learning behaviours and wellbeing, we can maximise the potential for sustainable learning and academic success.

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Read the JGHE Journal Paper:

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