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Can emotional intelligence enhance the student experience?

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Emotional intelligence is the ability to recognise, understand and manage one's own and other's emotions (Salovey & Mayer, 1990). As a construct it has been reported to predict about 80% of a person's success in life and identified as a vital requirement for success in virtually any job (Goleman, 1998, 2000). Despite the fact that emotional intelligence has been acknowledged as a foundation for student achievement and success in a higher education setting (Petrides Frederickson & Furnham, 2004; Parker, Summerfeldt, Hogan & Majeski, 2004; Lopes, et al. 2004; Pau & Croucher, 1999), there is still limited empirical evidence to support the notion that emotional intelligence will enhance the student experience. This paper will examine emotional intelligence competencies from an ability perspective of emotional intelligence, which Mayer and Salovey present as a means of explaining the constructs of emotional intelligence, and discuss the relevance and practical applications of these competencies for enhancing the student experience in a higher education context.

Keywords: emotional intelligence, student experience, academic leadership

Introduction

Evidence to support the benefits and importance of emotional intelligence for effecting a positive student experience is increasing. Parker et al. (2004) in examining the relationship between emotional intelligence and academic achievement found that academic success was significantly associated with emotional intelligence competencies. Petrides, Frederickson and Furnham (2004) also identified emotional intelligence to be a significant factor for overall academic performance and success. Parker, Summerfeldt, Hogan and Majeski (2004) found that emotional intelligence competencies were highly significant factors in the successful transition of students from secondary to tertiary education. Additionally they found that students who were effective in regulating and managing emotions were rarely impulsive and performed well under pressure (Parker Summerfeldt, Hogan & Majeski, 2004).

Other studies have found that emotional intelligence will: assist university students with learning disabilities achieve greater academic success (Hatzes, 1996; Reiff, Hatzes, Bramel & Gibbon, 2001), enhance the quality of university students' social interactions (Lopes, et al. 2004), and lessen the incidence of stress amongst university students (Pau & Croucher, 2003). Moreover, emotionally intelligent academic leaders can inspire trust, productivity, innovation and commitment from students (Cooper, 1997).

This paper will examine emotional intelligence constructs and then explore and discuss the relevance and practical implications of emotional intelligence for enhancing the student experience in a higher education context. Finally, some suggestions for future research are presented.

What is emotional intelligence?

Salovey and Mayer (1990) first conceptualised emotional intelligence as a component of social intelligence defining it as “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” (p.189). This definition was further developed to incorporate the notion of thinking about feelings (Mayer & Salovey, 1997). Mayer and Salovey (1997) described the complexities of emotional intelligence from what they coined an ability view of emotional intelligence (see Table 1). This ability view of emotional intelligence divides emotional intelligence into four domains, each related to a psychological process and each having a set of developmentally sequenced abilities that a person progresses through, from lower order to higher order abilities, as they become more emotionally intelligent (Mayer & Salovey, 1997).

Table 1: Mayer and Salovey’s ability view of emotional intelligence

Perceiving, appraising and expressing emotions	Emotional facilitation of thinking	Understanding and analysing emotions to enable utilisation of emotional knowledge	Regulating and managing emotions
Ability to identify emotion in ones thoughts, feelings and physical states.	Ability to use emotions to prioritize thinking by directing attention to important information.	Ability to label emotions and recognise relations among words and emotions.	Ability to stay open to feelings – good and bad.
Ability to identify emotions in other people.	Ability to generate emotions to assist judgement.	Ability to interpret the meanings that emotions convey.	Ability to reflectively engage or detach from an emotion depending upon its usefulness.
Ability to express emotions accurately.	Ability to use emotional mood swings to encourage consideration of multiple points of view.	Ability to understand complex, simultaneous or blends of feelings.	Ability to reflectively monitor emotions in oneself and others.
Ability to discriminate between accurate and inaccurate feelings.	Ability to use emotions to encourage specific problem solving approaches.	Ability to recognise likely transitions among emotions.	Ability to manage emotions by moderating negative emotions and enhancing positive ones .

From Mayer, J.D. & Salovey, P. (1997), What is Emotional Intelligence? In P. Salovey & D. Sluyter (Eds.) Emotional development and emotional intelligence: Educational implications. Basic Books: New York, pp. 3–31.

Emotional intelligence and the student experience

Practical applications of emotional intelligence for enhancing the student experience in higher education are described in the context of the four domains of the ability view of emotional intelligence proposed by Mayer & Salovey (1997). Additionally, exemplars and the relevance of emotional intelligence in academic leadership for enhancing the student experience are presented.

Perceiving, appraising and expressing emotions

Being able to identify one's own emotions and the emotions of others is a fundamental requirement for processing all of the other emotional intelligence competencies. According to Hargreaves (2000) emotional perception is not only the basis for emotional intelligence it is also at the core of high-quality teaching and learning. Emotions are identified in the gestures, facial expressions, actions, dialogue, tone or behaviour of individuals. Accurate discrimination of emotions however, can be challenging. For example, a student's abrupt explanation of why they have not met an assessment deadline might not be a sign of indignation but rather a manifestation of their concern. Nonchalant participation in a tutorial might not be sign of a student's casual indifference for the subject or course activity but rather an expression of their lack of understanding of the subject content.

The university environment is established as a professional setting in which physical and emotional distance between students and teachers is advocated. This characteristic of universities threatens the underpinnings of emotional perception. In order to enhance the student experience academic leaders need to accurately identify the student's emotions through attentive engagement with the student. Committing effort to developing skills related to perceiving emotions will assist academic leaders in recognising and comprehending why a student might be experiencing certain emotions.

Expressing emotions is also an important aspect of emotional intelligence. Students learn not only from the overt interactions they have with academic leaders but also from their covert exchanges with these leaders. A student can gain enormous insights into the acceptable and appropriate expression of their emotions from the examples of their academic leaders. For example the tone and language that an academic leader employs to converse with a student should be commensurate with what they would expect the student to use in a reciprocal exchange. Positive professional exchanges and interactions between the student and academic leader will go a long way to ensuring that appropriate communication results in a positive and developmental student experience.

Emotional facilitation of thinking

Emotional facilitation of thinking is concerned with using emotions to enable clarity of thought that enables an individual to make sound decisions and devise innovative solutions to problems. For students this is most applicable in the context of problem solving, particularly in relation to their learning. For example, the anxiety of an impending assessment deadline may focus the student's thoughts on possible innovative responses to the task and compel them to make prudent decisions that generate the eventual product. The angst of delivering a presentation to a group of peers may assist a student to facilitate clear thinking that leads to the articulate delivery of the presentation. Academic leaders need to continue to implore students to undertake activities that will challenge them and provide opportunities for the student to appreciate and practice emotional facilitation of thinking. The successes that students encounter in these activities will also assist in promoting and building their self

regard and confidence. These characteristics are integral for a positive student experience of higher education.

Understanding and analysing emotions to enable utilisation of emotional knowledge

Understanding and analysing emotions requires the ability to comprehend the emotions being expressed and recognise the complex relationships that exist between them. Being able to understand the reason for felt or expressed emotions and how emotions can develop over time will enable an individual to thoughtfully consider and develop appropriate strategies for managing different situations. Academic leaders can enhance the student experience by understanding why students are experiencing particular emotions, how these emotions can develop if not addressed and then appropriately addressing the situation in light of these understandings. For example, students who are consistently ill-behaved in lectures might initially be dissatisfied that the learning program is not meeting their needs. A prolonged period of this dissatisfaction could develop into contempt that is insidious and develops into even more disruptive behaviour that has the potential to influence other students. Such escalating conduct would be detrimental to the learning experience of both the students involved and also other students in the group. In this situation if the academic leader attempts to understand the learning needs of the student, which is the underlying root of the situation, and address these accordingly, the progression of emotions from dissatisfaction to contempt would be halted and the outcome would be a more positive student experience. The physical and emotional distance between students and teachers that is characteristic of the university setting can impede an academic leader from engaging sufficiently with a student to enable understanding and analysis of student emotions. It is important that academic leaders gather the information needed to understand student emotions through mechanisms that are available, such as course and subject evaluations. Engaging in practices that enable the academic leader to make informed decisions about student emotions and subsequently how to address them will ensure that the consequent student learning experiences are positive and valued.

Regulating and managing emotions

Regulating and managing emotions is the ability to control emotions in oneself and influence the control of emotions in others. In the higher education setting the academic leader can assist students in this regard by:

- taking an active interest in student concerns and appropriately respond to student issues;
- ensuring students are aware of what is expected of them and how they can meet desired outcomes;
- assisting students to identify potential problems and devise appropriate strategies for managing them;
- inspiring and motivating student engagement; and
- recognising and endeavouring to meet where feasible the needs of students.

Practices such as these will equip students with tools to take responsibility for ensuring their experience of higher education is positive and productive.

Conclusion

Enhancing the student experience by employing emotional intelligence is a relevant approach in the higher education setting. Currently there is little evidence of professional development for academic leaders focusing on emotional intelligence competencies. However, reports such

as Scott, Coates and Anderson (2008) that espouse the importance of emotional intelligence for academic leadership could see a shift in this trend. Universities should, as a matter of priority, promote and support activities that enable both academic leaders and students to develop an awareness and practical understanding of emotional intelligence competencies.

A key way universities can promote the development of emotional intelligence competencies in academic leaders is by funding training programs that explicitly address these constructs. These training programs, for example, could be implemented as an adjunct to existing university-sponsored academic professional development activities. Emotional intelligence competencies can be legitimately incorporated into professional development that focuses on teamwork, communication, collaboration, conflict management, and change management. As such, universities could support the inclusion of emotional intelligence instruction in programs or professional development that focus on these sorts of areas. Academic leaders can assist students to develop emotional intelligence competencies by including emotional intelligence instruction as a component of appropriate and applicable student subjects. By promoting and supporting activities that develop emotional intelligence competencies the likelihood and opportunity for enhancing the student experience will be heightened.

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