

Chapter 24

EMOTIONAL LITERACY EDUCATION IN A HONG KONG UNIVERSITY

Reflection and Proposal

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ABSTRACT

Since the 1970s, emotional literacy has been advocated as a part of the humanistic education project. It is generally agreed that the whole person education should contain what Mayer and Salovey (1997) define as “the ability to perceive emotions, to access and generate emotions so as to assist thought, to understand emotions and emotional knowledge, and to reflectively regulate emotions so as to promote emotional and intellectual growth.” (p. 5). While this set of abilities sounds commonsensical, there is a thriving international popular self-help literature business to indicate that our education system has not addressed the subject adequately. Although there have been quite a number of studies in the Western academia, proposing numerous ways to include emotional literacy in the curriculum, discussion in the Chinese education context has not been as active. Hong Kong has seen a lot of changes in its education system in the recent decades, but emotional literacy has not been an important focus of discussion. 2012 saw the change of university curriculum from 3 to 4 years, meaning that students enter university a year younger, after one public examination instead of two. Educators have noted the general emotional immaturity of the younger freshmen, and their inability to handle problems that come with this new identity. This paper is a reflection on the present educational direction in Hong Kong, and to advocate a more helpful emotional literacy curriculum in the university.

Keywords: emotional literacy, higher education, course development, humanities, student-centered teaching and learning.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the last decade in Hong Kong, new identity-labels have arisen to highlight the emergence of new types of people. Some high achieving school children are referred to as “gao fen di neng” (high-marks-low-ability), because while they demonstrate commendable academic performance, they seem to exhibit rather inadequate survival skills such as self-caring skills, interpersonal skills, and common sense. While scholars are trying to understand the emergence of this new type of school children in Hong Kong, some people refer to the existence of a certain type of parents, labelled as “guai shou jia zhang” (monster parents), who refuse to cooperate with the school authorities, if their own “professional” decisions about their children clash with whatever policies and practices are current in the school. This term is believed to come from a 2009 Japanese TV drama featuring just such type of parents, and is similar in meaning to “helicopter parents” which is the term used in the United States. In a society where proof of good academic training is the sure license to a good job and a relatively stable life, it is no wonder that conscientious parents see the first 20 years of their children’s life as a period of fierce and strategic battle to ensure a good life afterwards.

Surely there are different perceptions as to what a good life means. Economically, to have the means to sustain a reasonably worry-free life is a basic requirement. This is probably the most common view, and the easiest to fulfil – in a way – as many of the monster parents are doing it in their own ways. They plan ahead for their children, move to the best locations to access the best schools, enroll their children in as many extra-curricular courses as possible to equip them with extra skills and talents, and invest in the most advanced technology at home so that their children will not waste time at home not learning. But there are other important requirements besides academic qualification and subsequently economic wealth for a good life. Physical and mental health, emotional fulfilment, a sense of purpose and meaning in life, etc. are the less tangible but significant requirements for a good life. Because of the difficulty to quantify these requirements and ways to satisfy them, they are often not directly addressed in the school curriculum throughout the schooling years.

Daniel Goleman's (1995) book *Emotional Intelligence* brought the topic to the attention of international layman readers, putting emotional intelligence (and emotional literacy, which will be used interchangeably in this paper although there are slight differences between the two indicators) firmly on the map of any discussion of a good life. Although the exact abilities and aptitudes included in emotional intelligence (or literacy) vary with different scholars, it "may be construed as the repertoire of emotional competencies and skills available to an individual at a given point in time, for coping with the environmental demands and constraints" (Matthews, Zneider, & Roberts, 2002, p. 420). Brian Matthews, a veteran school teacher, quotes Steiner to justify having emotional literacy in the school curriculum, "To be emotionally literate is to be able to handle emotions in a way that improves your personal power and improves the quality of life around you. Emotional literacy improves relationships, creates loving possibilities between people, makes co-operative work possible, and facilitates the feeling of community" (Matthews, 2006, p. 69), although many scholars also indicate that as a result of improved emotional literacy, academic performance also improves.

Over the past decades, emotional intelligence has grown from an interest in a potential new intelligence to a research area. Besides the excitement of discovering a potential new intelligence in human beings, the heated discussion around emotional intelligence is also because of the difficulty in its definition. Mayer and Salovey (1997) gave a considered definition of emotional intelligence as:

[T]he ability to perceive accurately, appraise, and express emotion; the ability to access and/or generate feelings when they facilitate thought; the ability to understand emotion and emotional knowledge; and the ability to regulate emotions to promote emotional and intellectual growth (p. 10).

With Mayer and Salovey's definition, emotional intelligence includes four distinct skills of different levels: 1. Perception, appraisal, and expression of emotion; 2. Emotional facilitation of thinking; 3. Understanding and analyzing emotions; employing emotional knowledge; 4. Reflective regulation of emotions to promote emotional and intellectual growth (Mayer & Salovey, 1997, pp. 10-14). These layers of skills describe what an emotionally intelligent person is capable of doing.

But this ability-perspective is not the only way scholars understand emotional intelligence. Some include many personality traits which are generally considered as positive in enhancing interpersonal relationships and even success in career and social life. Mayer, Salovey and Caruso (2008) called these definitions which include these positive

personality traits “mixed models of EI” (p. 504). Some mixed models include personal dispositions which are difficult to measure objectively (unlike abilities), and often are just opinions or personal perceptions. While some personality traits can be seen as the cause of certain emotionally intelligent behavior, they’re not being specific abilities means that there is no objective and systematic means of measuring them, and in turn no reliable methods to train individuals to acquire these skills or abilities.

The problems in defining emotional intelligence have led to even more rigorous discussions. Mayer, Roberts, and Barsade identified three major approaches to emotional intelligence in their 2007 article in the *Annual Review of Psychology*. These three approaches are: “the specific-ability approaches” which concern individual mental capacities important to EI, “the integrative-model approaches” which regard EI as a cohesive, global ability; and a third approach which is the “mixed-model approach” (p. 511). Their article provides a detailed review of these three approaches and how they may or may not help to establish a systematic study of EI which can result in not only better understanding of but also construction of training methods.

Despite the significance many scholars attach to emotional literacy, it is still not a compulsory component found in major school curricular. Brian Matthews discusses the difficulties of having an agreed national curriculum on emotional literacy in UK, and one of such difficulties is the assessment of EL (emotional literacy) of the individual children. Assessment of performance is inevitable for any subjects, but in the case of EL, it poses a risk of putting labels on the individual children. Matthews, Zeidner, and Roberts note the range of programs used in the education and schooling of emotional competencies in their *Emotional Literacies: Science and Myth* (2002), and that they “fall under the general rubric of social and emotional learning programs (SEL) – an umbrella term that provides a common framework for programs with a wide array of specified outcomes. It refers to the knowledge, skills, and competencies that children acquire through social and emotional education, instruction, activities, or promotion efforts” (p. 445). Although these programs have different names and also target at cultivating different skills in the students, they are usually part of other problem-solving skills or survival skills programs; and when the focus is on emotional literacy, often run the risk of being seen as teaching students to feel in a specific “correct” way.

2. BACKGROUND

Compared to the Anglo-American school experiences, the Hong Kong situation is even more primitive in its lack of awareness in the significance of EL education beginning at an early age. Due to the intense competition in schools, even young children are often subject to a lot of pressure in their studies, so much so that UNICEF HK made children’s “Right to Play” the theme of 2013. This contextualizes the special types of parents and students in Hong Kong, the “monster parents” and “gao fen di neng” students. Hong Kong is in great need of school programs which will educate students in EL from an early age. The very emergence of “monster parents” highlights that school children in Hong Kong are not only facing the many challenges or stressors in their attempt to handle school, friends, self-understanding, but their very home can also be a major source of stress. Although in talking about any form of training, the school is normally considered the rightful place to fulfil such needs, in this case of the education of emotions, one would expect the parents to participate strongly because the home is supposed to offer a child the most secure emotional environment. But these “monster parents” do not seem to be reliable trainers to

participate in the education of children's emotions at home. It is therefore left to the official education system to offer the much needed training in the formal curriculum.

The formal education system in Hong Kong is a highly competitive one. Starting from a relatively young age, students are made to be aware of the importance of acquiring good grades so that they can join prestigious secondary schools and ultimately the university. It is therefore understandable that given such a context, formal curriculum will cover "useful" subject areas which will directly benefit students in terms of their performance in public examinations, and external examinations in joining overseas schools or universities. Emotional intelligence is not a component in the formal curriculum and not even an important sector in the gifted education system, which is a special section beyond the regular curriculum. Not only is there no focused interest in developing emotional intelligence training in formal schooling, there are not many studies to evaluate the need for this aspect of education for the young. Chan's (2003) study of gifted students in Hong Kong and their needs in social coping is a much needed but not often seen project type. Indeed, there is an urgent need in Hong Kong to have systematic planning and implementation of educational programmes concerning emotional intelligence across different student sectors. While this is not the place, and I am not in a position to offer any useful suggestion concerning schooling programs for primary (aged 6-12) and secondary (aged 12-17) school students, I would like to propose certain possibilities in the tertiary education sector now that Hong Kong has moved to a 4-year university curriculum. Being a faculty in the Department of Humanities and Creative Writing, Arts Faculty, Hong Kong Baptist University (HKBU), I believe that EL education for university students can be carried out through the "common year" experience and the "electives" component for students in all disciplines.

Since 2012, HKBU has admitted most students by faculty, and the first year is the common year when students have a chance to try the learning experience offered by different departments within the faculty. At the end of the first year, they will declare their major based on their interest and their academic performance. Besides having the freedom to savor different disciplines within the faculty, students are also required to take some General Education (GE) courses in this first year, to ensure a "whole person education" (a vision advocated by HKBU specifically). These courses cover core areas of Languages, IT management, Numeracy, PE, History and Civilization, Values and the Meaning of Life (HKBU website) as well as a choice from distribution areas (Arts, Business, Communication/Visual Arts, Science/Chinese Medicine, Social Sciences). This year of "common" learning experience for all students of HKBU, despite their chosen major, will be a golden opportunity for the introduction of EL courses, which will not only facilitate their learning in their chosen disciplines, but more significantly, in contributing to their "whole-person" development.

On top of that, the Arts Faculty can play a more proactive role in providing EL learning experiences through course development. As Matthews, Zeidner, and Roberts suggest, "children can learn by observing and modeling real, as well as symbolic, and representational models, curriculum based emotional learning comes naturally with many of the liberal arts" (Matthews, Zeidner, & Roberts, 2012, p. 443). I had made use of films in a course entitled "Lifelong Romance with Films" to describe and discuss the human condition at various phases of life – growing up, identity formation, entering the workforce, establishing and maintaining relationships, love and sex, aging, and death – as well as decision-making in the face of different conflicts and situations. In a course dealing with the appreciation and creation of stories, I had made use of a selection of well-known written and visual narratives to elicit personal comments and responses from students on a variety

of issues about human life. As the course engages students in both appreciation and creation, their active participation and contribution is compulsory and natural. From the comments given by the students in the end-of-semester teaching evaluation exercise, it was very clear that they had never had the chance to personally reflect on those issues about human society and life in their learning experience so far. These local students found the opportunity to engage in an honest and intimate discussion about life issues rare and hugely satisfying. It is the best proof that in the lack of any EL programs in our primary and secondary schooling, tertiary education should do its part in bridging the gap.

3. OLD FILMS/STORIES AND ETERNAL SENTIMENTS

One of the films I had used quite successfully in the Humanities classroom was *Sunset Boulevard* (Wilder, 1950), directed by Billy Wilder. Very briefly, the film is the story of Norma Desmond, a bygone silent film superstar, who had retired and hidden herself in her Sunset Boulevard mansion. Unable to accept her own aging and the passing of the silent movie era, she daily dreamed of a return to the silver screen, and had even penned a script for herself – the role of young princess Salome. One day, young scriptwriter Joe drove his car into the mansion garage when trying to evade his creditors. He was invited into the mansion and his profession aroused Norma's interest. She hired him to edit her script, and Joe, having nothing better to do, accepted, thinking that it was the best quick money he could earn.

Their relationship soon develops into something much more complicated than original scriptwriter and editor, and ends with Norma shooting Joe dead at her swimming pool. This famous film was used in my class as a cultural text representing a particular period in Hollywood history, also demonstrating different kinds of languages used in the human community (verbal language, facial expressions, body language, the language of movies, etc.), gender relations and representation, and so on. What is specifically worth noting for us here is the identity of the two main characters and what they represent – silent movie star, and young script writer for sound movies. Norma and Joe embody the differences between facial/body language and our linguistic system; as Norma famously said in the film “[w]e didn't need dialogue, we had faces then”. *These two systems of communicating human emotions can be discussed and evaluated in the classroom by referring to different scenes in the film, and designing different tasks in relation to these scenes for particular teaching and learning purposes. One of my favourite scenes is the first conversation between Joe and Norma, when he recognized her, and said “you used to be big”. What followed is Norma's lamentation of the decline in the movie business due to the introduction of irrelevant and corrupting new techniques. Norma's highly expressive face and her body gestures work in a completely different way in conveying her emotions from the deadpan face and almost monotonal Joe.*

Short in-class tasks could be designed to focus the discussion on how successfully or unsuccessfully these different “languages” convey emotions, the degree of success to a large extent depends on the subsequent development of the story. I feel that this kind of discussion tasks focusing on the expression of emotions can easily become part of the original disciplinary learning experience, and it can further be extended to achieve other learning outcomes such as creating further dialogues (for a creative writing class). This is not the place for a detailed lesson plan but I hope this brief discussion at least demonstrates how emotional literacy can be taught and made into a personal teaching and learning experience for students in the Humanities classroom without sacrificing the original learning outcomes of the discipline. In my class, I have also used episodes from the

American TV series *Lie to Me* (Baum, 2009-2011) which was developed based on some scientific research about micro-expressions. Although the series is entertainment and the stories fictional, the science it refers to is real, and if desired, can be pursued in an academic manner for clarity and accuracy. Using the cultural production *Lie to Me* in class can certainly enhance the learning of how facial expressions convey/hide emotions in a creative and interesting way.

In the same way, filmic or literary narratives can be creatively used for facilitating understanding of the antecedents and consequences of emotions without sacrificing the teaching of the original disciplinary knowledge. In fact, the explanation of what causes different emotions and the consequences of emotions is a core component of film and literary studies. Dorothy Van Ghent in her critique of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* actually called Elizabeth's reflection and finally understanding of emotions a kind of intelligence. She wrote about the characters,

What will be tested will be their integrity of "feeling" under the crudely threatening social pressures. The moral life, then, will be equated with delicacy and integrity of feeling, and its capacity for growth under adverse conditions. In the person of the chief protagonist, Elizabeth, it really will be equated with intelligence. In this conception of the moral life, Jane Austen shows herself the closest kin to Henry James in the tradition of the English novel; for by James, also, the moral life was located in emotional intelligence, and he too limited himself to observation of its workings in the narrow area of a sophisticated civilization (Van Ghent, 1953, pp. 106-107).

In the case of Elizabeth, she has allowed her feelings about Mr. Darcy to be influenced by her first impressions and also other people's opinions. It is only when she takes the time to replay their various encounters, to reflect on the words and behaviour of Mr. Darcy that she realizes how her emotions come to their being. It is a very well depicted example of how our emotions can be easily manipulated without ourselves realizing it. In fact, before *Pride and Prejudice*, Austen had thought about using "First Impression" as the title of the book, and understanding the power of the first impression is emotional literacy.

Narratives long or short, visual or verbal, can be taught with an awareness to the track of characters' emotions. While *Pride and Prejudice* has a place in the classroom of literary novels, poems and short stories could also become good materials for discussion of the emergence and consequences of emotions. I remember using Kate Chopin's short piece "Story of an Hour" (1894) for different teaching and learning experiences, as it covers such a range of issues such as the gender relations, the working of the human psyche, literary language for representing emotions and psychological status, and the classic pattern of a well written short story. When the scene during which Mrs. Mallard looked out of the window is material for discussing the link between internal emotions and external manifestation, the absent husband makes a good in-class exercise for students to reconstruct emotions based on the known facts in the story. To have the students doing creative writing in the voice of the husband and Mrs. Mallard is a very good exercise to let them trace the development of various emotions between the couple at the specific historical and cultural setting. To follow up, the "what if" exercise gives the students a chance to imagine a different consequence had the characters behaved differently in the course of their life together. This kind of exercise is not only firmly focusing on the teaching of the literary text, but also helping to extend the literary experience to the real life of the students, so that they can understanding the various interpersonal relationships around them by referring to the discussions in class.

4. FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

Obviously there is much to be done to cultivate an awareness of the need to properly and formally incorporate emotional literacy in the university curriculum. Ideally, in Hong Kong, where emotional literacy is still not a common subject or focus of learning activities in the primary and secondary classroom, educators should explore the possibility of introducing some elements of teaching and learning which are specifically to cater to the needs of the highly stressed and much pressurized Hong Kong children and teenagers. Before successful implementation, the nature and the extent of this need should be studied. Parker, Summerfeldt, Hogan, and Majeski (2004) study concerning the connection between emotional intelligence and academic success is definitely one type of research that could provide a picture of such correlation in the Hong Kong situation. That will be a task for local educators to take up. In writing this paper and suggesting what could perhaps be done in the higher education, I have benefited from previous researches and studies which have shown a positive connection between emotional intelligence and an overall sense of well-being. Studies such as Nelis, Quoidbach, Mikolajczak, & Hansenne (2009) have also shown that systematic training is possible to lead students to acquire a certain level of abilities in emotional intelligence. Even when Hong Kong students receive training in their primary and secondary education, it still needs to provide continuous learning in this area, because human beings face different challenges and their emotions go through new experiences at different stages of their life. Researchers working in higher education have to continue to seek ways to incorporate emotional literacy training in the formal curriculum. I hope it is not just the Humanities which will take up this task, although it is a suitable field to start with. The best scenario will be when emotional literacy awareness is a fact in all classrooms, across all disciplines. That will mean educators themselves are trained and well-prepared to maintain an emotional literate classroom.

5. CONCLUSION/DISCUSSION

The call for a comprehensive EL education program in Hong Kong to cover the school years is on. For the time being, the universities should do their part when they are admitting younger students than before. The expanded curriculum offers a good opportunity, and the Arts related faculties should also incorporate EL into their discipline-knowledge courses.

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