

## THE ROLE OF EMOTIONAL REGULATION IN ACADEMIC LEARNING\*

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### **Abstract**

*The present study analyzes modalities and effects of emotional management in the case of the students studying to become teachers. Emotions have a very important role in the learning activity and they are difficult to rebalance or regulate, being inherent, no matter if they are positive or negative. We are pleading for the fact that a better awareness of constructive emotions, of those reactions that can mobilize young people, but also of emotional manifestations with a disorganizing role, as well as the application of control techniques are ways to achieve a state of pleasure in learning, to capitalize on intrinsic resources at key moments in academic life, such as exams. At the level of higher education, it is possible to know and remove emotional difficulties, manage aversions, resolve conflicts, productively capitalize on one's own affectivity, in a pleasant, interactive climate.*

**Key words:** *Emotions; Emotional intelligence; Regulation; Academic learning; Autonomy.*

### **1. Introduction**

Whether they have a positive hedonic tone or they are felt negatively, emotions, as reactions to change, have an adaptive role and are absolutely necessary to anyone. Sometimes we voluntarily intervene and try to make them compatible with our goals. Regarding the management of learning, Candy (1991) showed that the term emphasizes the concern of the learner to use the opportunities that arise, without institutional support, and, above all, the control exercised to obtain personal autonomy. In a world where efficiency, maintaining health and, at the same time, achieving well-being is important, the concern about the prudent use of resources, the development of regulatory capacities, the improvement of the social and academic learning process, by capitalizing on all the dimensions of self-management, appear to be necessary.

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The study of emotions has become vital in explaining human reactions, actions and interactions in different social environments. Positive emotional states are expected to be real and optimal. For example, "the flow" (Goleman, 1995, *apud* Roco, 2001, p. 170) is emotional intelligence at its highest degree, representing the foundation of employing personal ability in the service of performance and learning.

What would be useful? Regulation, control, management, balance, stability or optimum in the field of emotions? Being temperate is not being over-emotional, however, according to Goleman, Aristotle observed that emotions should be consistent with the situation, proportional to it (Goleman, 1995).

In Salanova's view (2021), resilience, as reconstruction, self-overcoming, successful adaptation in difficult situations, develops through the cultivation of positive emotions.

## **2. The theoretical framework**

### **2.1. The structure of affective experiences**

The online explanatory dictionary considers emotions - affective reactions of medium or short intensity, often accompanied by changes in the activity of the body, reflecting the attitude of the individual towards reality. In Latin, *emotus* means moved.

According to the Romanian psychologist Zlate (2000), affective experiences are classified into:

a) primary affective processes (affective tone, feelings of organic origin, affects);

b) complex affective processes, where emotions are integrated (which, in turn, can be classified into current emotions and higher emotions) and moods, which are weaker in intensity than emotions, but with a greater extension in time, being a cumulative effect of the various circumstances that the person went through;

c) superior affective processes, which involve the human personality and are strongly marked by social learning.

Superior emotions are essential for academic learning, those that are supported by values, beliefs, own interests, as a result of assigning values to certain events, activities, etc.

The most familiar emotions can be identified on polar coordinates and can then vary in intensity. They are:

- Trust versus Disgust;
- Anticipation versus Surprise;
- Fear versus Anger;
- Joy versus Sadness.

An important role in student learning belongs to emotional intelligence, "which includes self-control, zeal, perseverance and the ability to self-motivate" (Goleman, 2001, p. 10). Beyond psychological, pedagogical and social explanations, current concerns are focused on deciphering the internal, neural mechanisms that

govern the affective system, through various areas of the brain that are activated (Goleman, 2006; Neacșu, 2019; Neacșu and Suditu, 2020; Ciurea, 2022).

The theoretical foundations of emotional intelligence were developed by Sternberg in 1985, Vernon in 1989, Salovey and Mayer in 1990; by Goleman, in 1995, 2006, a very well-known author in Romania; by Bar-On, in 1997, and the initial models have expanded, currently, on the issue of the development of interpersonal relationships, on the socio-emotional, from an early age.

## **2.2. Emotional management**

It is notable that "emotions contain the wisdom of the ages" (Lazarus, 1991, p. 820), as a sign of the influence on human control. Long before, since the 1970s, Tomkins supported this concept, because he believed that there are vocal expressions of emotions that cannot be associated with facial expressions, suggesting self-control (Tomkins, 1963, *apud* Atudorei, 2017).

Landy (2002) specified that emotional self-regulation refers to both the intervention in internal reactions and the behavioral expression of emotions.

The diversity of the viewpoints related to emotional management is impressive, and, from a social perspective, "The positivist approach emphasizes the emotional (or motivational) discovery, the causes that determine behavior, and interpretivism treats emotion as a central aspect of culture." (Atudorei, 2017, p. 11).

According to (Chelcea, 2008, p. 91), Peggy A. Thoits, from California State University, she introduced the idea of emotion management, by analyzing:

1. the sources of the discrepancy between the felt emotion and the rules for displaying emotions;
2. the emotion management strategies or development of solutions to reduce the discrepancy in the experienced emotion;
3. the emotion that is expected to be displayed, according to the cultural rules, and the conditions under which emotion management fails.

Emotional management techniques can vary: from seeking information, support, debates, confrontation, to acceptance, relaxation, withdrawal, progressive desensitization, reinterpretation of feelings, etc.

In university/higher education, the very attitude towards learning favors the achievement of quality results, and the reaction depends on that person's learning background. Paradoxically, the ones who are aware of their own learning capacity, through metacognition, are also the people with a trained learning capacity. Therefore, one of the possible explanations is related to the issue of interests in learning: the more someone knows, more precisely and to a greater extent a certain field, the more curious he becomes.

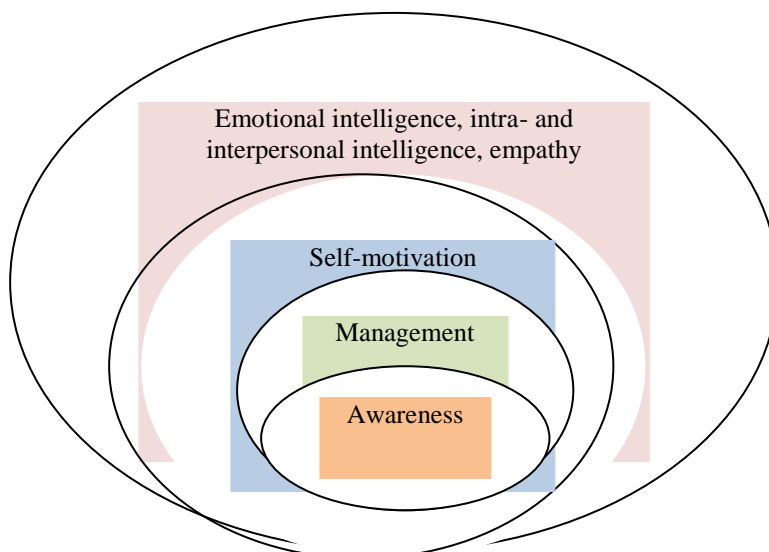
Emotions are related to motivation, and results depend on many factors. In a work on the self-management of academic learning (Frășineanu, 2012).

We demonstrated that, in order to succeed in learning, the student must be responsible, goal-directed, active, persistent, self-regulating, reflective and flexible, as well as optimistic with regard to its success. Such components create efficiency in the use of psychological mechanisms, as internal learning resources. The opposite

cases occur when students delay the beginning and carrying out the learning process, respond to other competitive temptations, more pleasant than learning, fail to check themselves, choose regulating solutions, fail to cope with the inherent stress. Our emotions are very important because they ensure survival - they alert us when we lack the natural impulse, when we feel alone, when we no longer need to communicate with other people because we are afraid or feel rejected.

Specifically, affective control means the awareness of emotions, of affective states and their management. In order to finalize emotional control, self-motivation is necessary, which helps in overcoming obstacles, failures, and frustrations. Emotional control involves effective strategies for regulating temper, anger and irritation in the face of frustrations (OECD, 2020, p. 8). In the case of the learner, empathy, as a phenomenon of understanding the other, is useful to clarify tasks, requirements, external expectations regarding the achievement of learning. Furthermore, empathy, for example, is important in establishing interpersonal relationships (Marcus, 1997, p. 24). Such an intervention is applied not only individually, but also in groups. Consequently, socio-emotional learning activates five key competencies: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relational skills, responsible decision-making.

We believe that the emotional optimum would involve both adequate (realistic) self-appreciation, as well as the channeling and use of emotions in order to achieve the learning objectives. The explanation is suggested in the following figure (Frăsineanu, 2012, p. 80):



**Figure 1. Levels of emotional control in learning**

### **3. Methods and experimental group**

An awareness of emotions, a strategic approach is absolutely useful in learning. Woolfolk (*apud* Negovan, 2004) included in the category of affective

strategies: independent thinking, the development of intuition about egocentrism, training the inclination towards correctness, intellectual courage, perseverance, confidence in action, strategies to cope with anxiety, limiting competition, controlling the need to win.

Consequently, learning self-management strategies include a series of tactics that differ according to the fields of knowledge (*idem*, 2004, pp. 163-165): sequencing of learning; self-contract; imagining action models; changing self-perception and negative self-image; anticipating difficulties and how to solve them; self-administration of rewards.

Fernández-Abascal (2022) showed that the idea of emotional regulation is not new (Clouston, used it since 1884), and regulation involves "learned natural processes, through which we can exert an influence on our emotions, especially on the time, manner and the duration of their expression and manifestation", while "dysregulation" is seen as a lack of control which leads to hyperactivity, to very intense emotions, which destabilize us (Fernandez-Abascal, 2021, p. 125).

Some previous results are interesting: Roco (2001, p. 157) analyzed the evaluations of a sample of students in emotional intelligence tests, in 1995, 1996, and their coefficient was quite low in relation to the maximum, the best scores being obtained by specializations such as Psychology, Medicine, Journalism. In this case, optimism (overcoming obstacles without self-blame), understanding the causes that lead to anger, working out alternative solutions, temporary relaxation in moments of anger and self-control of negative emotions obtained low marks, which demonstrated the need for training in terms of emotional intelligence (*idem*, 2001).

Our formative experiment was carried out in the form of action research, in the case of the students we work with, in the psychopedagogical training module, from 2019 to the present.

Thus, for both the students and the master's students whom we interacted with, through voluntary acceptance, especially at the beginning of the training sessions, we were concerned with the development of their socio-emotional skills, an important aspect for the teaching career.

The training actions were achieved through: involving students in the analysis of academic and professional development needs, stimulating their positive motivation towards learning, indicating some ways of (self) regulation to adapt to the demands of the university environment, applying some techniques for the awareness of emotions, practicing concrete methods of emotional management. Through these, we pursued the development of positive attitudes towards learning and the achievement of a state of emotional balance.

The experimental group was made up of people who actively participated in the non-formal interactions, in the topic of self-management of learning, as personal research concerns, carried out face-to-face or on training platforms during the academic years 2019-2020; 2020-2021; 2021-2022. The control group consisted of a similar number of students, from the University of Craiova, who were not interested in the proposed issue.

We can appreciate that the use of informative materials, certain interactions with the peers, with support people, the call for simulations, for motivational stories, debating/watching some microfilms have an effect on the positivization of the subjects' emotions, the students included in the experiment stating at the end of the period that they felt more emotionally balanced and that they were more relaxed about their academic work.

A series of measures for the management of emotions have proven useful:

- Recording thoughts and emotions in a journal that helps to increase self-awareness and self-reflection, which can prevent inappropriate repetitive emotions;
- Using the monologue for self-encouragement, in a friendly manner;
- Carrying out discussions with colleagues, friends, relatives to inventory their points of view for the identified problems;
- Awareness of those situations, people, things, words that trigger irritation, anger, fury and applying the methods through which they can be changed;
- Using individual strategies to calm down and change moods from negative to positive;
- Capitalizing on opportunities to cooperate with colleagues, with teachers who are willing to provide support;
- Taking intuition into account in the case of some decisions; even when that person is significant, we can have the courage to issue a different point of view, resisting group pressure;
- Manifesting perceptiveness to one's own socio-emotional needs;
- Considering adversities, mistakes, failures as learning opportunities, by taking responsibility.

#### **4. Discussion of results**

Following discussions about one's own learning, conditions of intellectual hygiene, well-being and emotional health, with a focus on regulatory processes (Motivation, Affectivity), we were able to detect changes in the perspectives embraced by the students. Thus, the classic dichotomy, positive thinking-negative thinking, can be overcome through correct/realistic thinking (Anthony, 2011).

The visualization of a thought, as "applied imagination" (*idem*, 2011, p. 105), represents an instrument of change.

Even if not all students like to learn, this aspect being dynamic, the quantitative data highlighted in Table 1 showed that if students were aware of the role of affective learning, as well as the presence of emotional saboteurs, their possibilities to detach, to achieve open, enthusiastic learning activity works and has effects during independent study. The quantitative data are revealed in table 1.

**Table 1. The extent to which students considered that they enjoy learning, following the applied emotional regulation**

Measure/ Level	Experimental Group		Internal Control Group		Differences Experimental Group – Internal Control Group
	No	%	No	%	%
Very much	45	34.1	21	15.6	+32.5
A lot	45	34.1	59	43.7	-9.6
Medium	33	24.4	42	31.1	-6.7
A little	2	1.5	6	4.4	-2.9
Very little or not at all	3	2.2	6	4.4	-2.2
No answer	5	3.7	1	0.7	+3
Total	135	100.0	135	100.0	

We can observe that, in comparison with the students from the internal control sample, a large part of the students from the experimental sample learned with pleasure at a very high level, this aspect being explained by the possession of some tools that can facilitate emotional management.

The cumulative level "very much and a lot" was 68% for the experimental sample, compared to 59.3% in the case of the control sample. Qualitatively, in the case of the students or master's students who had vocational specializations (Theatre, Communication and Public Relations, Musical Interpretation, Automation, Computers, Electronics) from the control sample, we found the existence of certain answers close to those recorded in the case of the experimental sample.

A second studied aspect was the ability to handle/emotional management in stressful/frustrating situations. This skill is acquired through practice.

The experimental group, similarly to the control group, had mostly written assessments, recognized for their advantage in eliminating disorganizing emotions. Both in the situation they were evaluated in writing and in the case of oral evaluations, the students and master's students in the experimental group stated that they had a decrease in fear or shame, compared to past moments, by using autosuggestion techniques, through sharing concern with colleagues or close people, including the examining teacher (See table 2).

**Table 2. The extent to which the students in the experimental group controlled their emotions during the exams (self-perception)**

Measure/Level	In the present		In the past		Present-past differences
	No	%	No	%	
Very much	59	43.70	35	25.92	+17.78
A lot	61	45.18	27	20.0	+25.18
Medium	13	9.62	50	37.03	-27.41
A little	1	0.07	10	7.41	-7.34
Very little or not at all	0	0	12	8.88	-8.88
No answer	1	0.07	1	0.07	=
Total	135	100.0	135	100.0	

It was gratifying that, compared to the past, there is a self-perception of some cumulative increases of 42.96% in the very high and high level at which students manage to control their anticipatory or current emotions: fear of the unknown, panic when they cannot fulfill a requirement, fear of ridicule, fear of disapproval, anger at not passing the exam, self-blame, etc.

Of course, self-perception as an investigative filter has its limitations. Fernández-Berrocal said that people can answer incorrectly for several reasons: depending on what they think is socially appropriate or they are subjective, through overestimations, underestimations (Fernández-Berrocal, 2022, p. 46).

For the subjects included in the investigated group, precisely this kind of awareness, self-evaluation, accompanied by resolution strategies, the process of mutual sharing, the reflexive act applied in a sustained way – became useful, representing gains in their academic experience.

**Table 3. The extent to which the students in the experimental group self-assess the existence/use of some sub-skills in terms of emotional management**

Criterion	Percentage
Knowing and removing emotional difficulties	63%
The ability to deal with aversions, conflicts	46%
The ability to use emotions constructively/ productively	58%
The ability to create a pleasant climate	72%
Competence of collaboration with others	69%



Another aspect self-assessed by the participants was that of detailing some components of emotional competence and valuing their possession. For the 135 students and master's students included in the sample, the extent to which they consider that they possess or do not possess certain sub-competencies of emotional management is presented in Table 3.

Data of Table 3 confirms the possession of some emotional management sub-skills, in total, on average 61.6%; the easiest for the students was to create a pleasant climate or collaborate with others, because such possibilities are dependent on the spirit of initiative, on will, while dealing with aversions or interpersonal conflicts were considered the most difficult components, less acquired, their approach being contextual.

## 5. Conclusion

The affirmations accompanied by positive images and emotions, the change of perspective, the appeal to alternative perspectives are determinants of success in academic learning, which influence the future professional integration.

The strength of positive thinking (Peale, 2017), achieving states of acceptance of one's emotions counteract the psychological discomfort, the feelings of inadequacy, the social shyness, very present in the case of new generations, boosting the manifestation of vitality.

The understanding of negative states, their acceptance aim to reduce the unwanted effects, because although they are levers for discharge, the lack of control and the long time of manifestation turn them into chronic, worrying phenomena.

Some youth or adult training gains in academia allow transfers to resolve emotionally difficult or critical situations. They can be flight, attack, manipulation, assertiveness, among these, the desirable one being assertiveness, as personal, constructive affirmation.

So, emotional management is useful in overcoming obstacles, by capitalizing on opportunities. Beyond the illustrative nature of the micro-experiment reported by us, the presented ideas can be continued with other directions of emotional education.

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