

## THE EMOTIONAL WELL-BEING OF LEARNERS AS A DETERMINANT OF THE TRAINING ACTIVITY\*

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### **Abstract**

*Our article focuses on the complex issue of creating the emotional well-being needed by the students in academic learning. Especially after the COVID-19 pandemic, this challenge has become an aspect that is better acknowledged by both the trainers and the learners, and, following the applied empirical research, we managed to find out to what extent the well-being of our students conditions the activity of teaching-learning-assessment and, above all, how we can contribute to its establishment.*

*Social connection is a central factor, which has an impact on well-being, and the pandemic situation, evaluated through the eyes of the students included in the research sample, some time after it ended, confirmed that the most important factor for their well-being was the relationship with those close to them, with their colleagues and with the teachers they felt connected to. An essential role in this situation is attributed to affective regulation, possible to achieve through external facilitation, but, above all, through self-determination. However, whether they have a positive hedonic tone or are negatively felt, emotions, as reactions to change, have an adaptive role and are absolutely necessary for everyone.*

**Key words:** Training; Students; Well-being; Determinant; Emotional regulation.

### **1. What does emotional well-being mean in the academic environment?**

By training students, we understand the teaching, learning and assessment processes, with an emphasis on learning.

From a perspective that has the learner at its center, we appreciate that the complex activity of academic learning is influenced by a series of internal and external factors, among the internal ones being important: previous experiences;

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reporting to the results obtained; the desire for self-realization; the prestige gained through learning; intrinsic motivation; the educational ideal; the attitude towards oneself; the positive attitude towards learning; the attitude towards effort and professional training; moral-character traits; the will to learn; reporting to the social requirements and values of contemporary society.

At the level of each student, there intervene factors such as: maturity level, age, gender, social environment, self-image, temperament type, extroverted orientation of temperament, study skills, affective state that they induce themselves or which is created, in a multivariate and difficult to quantify context.

From an affective point of view, students experience different situations, closely related to their level of affectivity, which has a visible impact when they approach learning contents or when it is necessary to understand and update some experiences.

According to Diener, Lucas and Oishi (2002, p. 64), the definition of subjective well-being is an extensive one, because it involves experiencing pleasant emotions, the existence of low levels of unpleasant emotions, an increased life satisfaction, and its measurement is variable, that is, subjected to probability, especially over time, through the intervention of positive or negative memory filters that people apply.

Muntele-Hendreş (2021) explains, in an article focused on elucidating the predictive or the well-being creating aspect, that subjective well-being is synonymous, in common language, with happiness. In turn, the psychological meaning of happiness is from an affective point of view, that of joy, of positive emotion, and, from a cognitive point of view, that of satisfaction with one's life.

The emotional well-being, embodied in the case of training in the university environment, in students (aspect we stopped on), is a part of the general state of well-being, because a person can refer to many plans of his state of well-being: physical, financial, material, professional, marital, etc. and at several stages of his life.

For an effective academic learning, higher positive emotions are essential, those that are based on values, beliefs, personal interests, as a result of assigning value meanings to some events or activities. This is where joy, confidence, and anticipation come from. The regulation of emotions is useful to promote emotional and intellectual growth (Trofaia, Corotchiu, 2019).

As we previously showed, there is no exhaustive quantification of these states, but they are related to feeling comfortable/safe, experiencing favorable/advantageous situations, feeling good, satisfied, having pleasure, being delighted, considering ourselves happy, being satisfied, feeling fulfilled.

In 2002, Diener, Lucas and Oishi listed among the pioneers of well-being/happiness theories Aristotle, then, much later, Freud and Maslow.

Currently, according to European Commission documents (2023), well-being at school means that pupils/students feel safe, valued and respected; being actively and meaningfully involved in academic and social activities; having positive self-esteem, self-efficacy and a sense of autonomy; maintaining positive and supportive

relationships with their teachers and peers; showing a sense of belonging to the class and the school; feeling happy and satisfied with their school life.

## **2. Aspects found in the field of literature. Well-being – determined or determinant?**

Neacșu and Suditu (2020) emphasized the need for a balanced interaction between emotions, cognition and socio-moral values, which would contribute to the establishment of a healthy, stable, predictable and creative emotional climate, and also ensure the unity of mental, emotional, spiritual and physical life. Regarding the relationship between learning and emotionality, the mentioned authors argued that: "The objectives of human learning, especially today, emphasize the results of emotional-affective learning, which can suggest essential things regarding, in particular, the value of principles, legalities, working technologies, the necessary strategies and resources (...)." (p. 86).

The probable causes of well-being are multiple (Muntele-Hendreș, 2021) and they come from heredity, personality traits, as well as the environment. For example, there is clear research that correlates well-being with: extraversion; avoidance of neuroticism; self-esteem; place of internal control; optimism; formulation of clear goals in life.

Also, the existence of well-being is determined by: growing older (by resorting to self-regulation); the male gender (through the nonintervention of empathy, sadness); securing financial resources to help meet basic needs; access to a high social class or a quality lifestyle; a good level of education and culture (which ensures adaptation); social comparison applied moderately (Argyle, 2001, *apud* Muntele-Hendreș, 2021). It is a certainty that the positive emotional state influences, in turn, mental health, consisting of brain functioning and adaptive social manifestation.

Self-realization is a central element of emotional well-being, the latter meaning all the actions we take to bring about a positive change in our lives. The theory of self-determination (Ryan and Deci, 2000) postulated the connection between the subjective state of well-being and the manifestation of autonomy, competency and affiliation.

In fact, the subjective nature of well-being consists in the fact that, although they are short-lived and fluctuating, the assessments of the experienced emotional states can be considered representative of the nature of that person's everyday life, and the fact that the state of well-being can be approached generatively comes from the status that these perceptions and judgments obtain for the next stage of life, being bases for new experiences.

According to the research of Brown, Hoyer and Nicholson (2012), self-esteem, self-efficacy, and social connectedness were all significant mediators of the volunteering-well-being relationship, and especially social connectedness remains subject to longitudinal analyzes to demonstrate its role as a causal factor for well-being.

In essence, positive affectivity refers to emotional states and traits that induce positive perceptions about oneself (self-esteem, self-efficacy), about the world we live in (feelings of coherence, controllability) and about the future (optimism). The subjective state of well-being is very close to happiness, and according to Seligman (2007, p. 77), a supporter of positive psychology, the formula for authentic, lasting happiness is a combination of genetic tendencies, with life circumstances and factors that are under our voluntary control by exercising positive character traits and by restructuring/ diminishing the negative ones. In other words, it is about the integration of the pleasant life with the good life and the meaningful life.

Considering the impact of the teachers' well-being on the quality of the educational process, a foray into the literature states that "Relevant and impactful research has associated well-being (or subjective happiness) with performance (Duckworth, Quinn, & Seligman, 2009), with resilience in the teaching activity (Klusmann, Kunter, Trautwein, Lüdtke, & Baumert, 2008), quality and performance in teaching (Retelsdorf, Butler, Streblov, & Schiefele, 2010), respectively the quality of learning outcomes (Caprara, Barbaranelli, Steca & Malone, 2006; Pakarinen *et al.*, 2010; Taylor & Ntoumanis, 2007)" (Tonciu, 2019, p. 16).

Returning to the person being trained, we can conclude, according to the opinion of Stein and Book (2007), that the general state of well-being of everyone depends on: a) Optimism, which is the ability to maintain a realistic and positive attitude, especially in difficult times; b) Happiness, which is the ability to be satisfied with life, to enjoy people, to be full of enthusiasm in a series of activities.

### **3. Solutions for achieving well-being**

While emotional dysregulation consists in the "lack of control over the emotional process", emotional regulation resides in exercising influence over one's own emotions, "in particular, over the moment, manner, duration of their expression and manifestation" (Fernandez-Abascal, 2021, p. 125). An example given by the same author for emotional management, in facing difficult life situations, such as the one caused by COVID-19, is to get rid of "negative thoughts by remembering the happy moments in our lives, planning wonderful vacations or finding someone to share our problems with" (p. 129).

To achieve well-being, the solutions are diverse: experiencing emotions with a positive hedonic tone, because positive emotions open the way to engaging in life goals, which is closely related to the concern for personal development and maturation. Involvement produces well-being, creates positivity, protects health. Being at the origin of the psycho-emotional state, physical activity, balanced nutrition and quality sleep are also mechanisms that can be applied. Other techniques that can be applied, especially by educators, are avoiding criticism through an acceptance that facilitates change; proactive manifestation, decisiveness, empathy, tolerance, honesty and sincerity, treating with mutual care.

Managing emotions requires that a person who has an experience should also feel it, instead of repressing it, and then the experience is used to make a better decision. Reporting to affects is done in a thoughtful, logical manner, rather than

letting ourselves go and acting on them without anticipating the consequences. So, the ability to successfully manage emotions entails the awareness, acceptance and use of emotions in problem solving.

From the perspective of the ability to deal with aversions, conflicts, we appreciate as very useful and transferable to this aspect, of acquiring a positive emotional state, the "transformative approach", where "the main objective is exactly the "change for the better" of the parties" (Popescu, 2014, p. 191).

The reverse of the causes of unhappiness, identified by Seligman (2007), can become ways to contribute to one's own happiness. The PERMA model he proposed includes: Positive Emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning and Accomplishments, and the temporal dimensions we must direct our attention to are both the present and the past or the future.

The role of external factors that influence the students' well-being is highlighted by concepts according to which "The university professor satisfied with life, who shares positive feelings in relation to their events, is a model for the students, contributing to the formation of specialists adapted to the contemporary professional and social rigors" (Batog, 2021, p. 191). Or, according to Martinez Martinez (2022, p. 23), from the perspective of psychological research, preventing certain situations and improving the lives of ordinary people are goals worthy of being taken into consideration because "(...) people's strengths act as shock absorbers or shields against mental disorders: courage, optimism, interpersonal skills, faith, hope, honesty, perseverance (...), to name a few".

Therefore, some techniques for cultivating well-being are: savoring the pleasure experienced through awareness and focused attention; combating deficient thinking styles (for example, pessimistic, of all-or-nothing kind) through cognitive therapies; practicing gratitude; indulgent restructuring/rewriting of personal history; favoring the emergence of positive emotions; strengthening social relationships.

#### **4. The influence of online learning on the well-being of students**

The opportunities that online technology brings derive from its main characteristics and advantages, which can offer situations similar to the real ones, generate the same types of responses from the learners, while also offering a high degree of control over the elements that make up the virtual environment.

The receptivity of ICT is obvious (New Technologies of Information and Communication) at the level of students, through accessibility, activism, interactivity, increasing the speed changes are produced and communicated with, recourse to critical thinking, which contributes to: obtaining a higher degree of autonomy in knowledge, increased accessibility, relatively low costs.

However, there are also many disadvantages of online education, including: the increase in the workload for teachers and students, the psychological discomfort involved in the uncertainty of searching for learning materials in the accessed sources, the increase in time allocated for information activity, demotivation in learning, the tendency to plagiarize/copy, poor social relations, loneliness,

sometimes cyberbullying, fatigue, damage to health, loss of self-confidence, sedentarism, etc.

Seligman (2007, p. 174) indicates among the causes of unhappiness: exaggerated individualism, exaggerated use of artificial ways to reach happiness (TV, drugs, shopping, games, etc.) and, last but not least, the lack of challenges brought by developed technology, which replaces efforts and makes young people believe that everything should and can be taken for granted.

Both in traditional, face-to-face training, and especially for the modern academic environment, influenced by modern, online training, can be applied what Goleman (2005) identifies as emotional activism: self-control and the ability to overcome anxiety and stress.

We fully agree with Goleman's (2005) proposal that directing one's own emotions and empathy should contribute to the development of social competency, through which the person manages to easily get along with people and correct "mismatches" in the social environment, because such a strategy is very useful in the context of student training.

Because more and more students are engaged in professional activities, a balance between work and personal life leads to better morale, as advocated by Leovaridis and Cărcu (2018). Furthermore, the learning ability of postsecondary students is affected by their mental health and well-being (Lindsay *et al.*, 2023).

From a perspective that seeks to manage toxic situations and relate effectively to the people around us, Cantopher (2019, pp. 185-228) recommends staying calm and present, not getting involved in unnecessary conflicts, and de-escalating/fighting external discomforts of profiteers, abusers, slackers, energy vampires, manipulators, braggarts, narcissists, psychopaths, addicts and others, who endanger our well-being. It is interesting that even that particular person can find that he has a toxic behavior, in the sense that he harms those around him, and, then, progressive changes are needed.

As shown by Dumitrescu and Dumitrescu (2014, p. 261), "The fundamental parts of emotional intelligence, as well as its global structure, can be improved through training, guidance and experience".

## **5. Results obtained in the empirical research carried out**

For the students who are trained in the certification program for the teaching profession, acquiring an initial training to be, in turn, trainers, the empirical methods of investigation such as the focus group and the pedagogical natural micro-experiment, applied in the framework of the action-research, represented, from our point of view, non-invasive methods through which we could find out their perceptions and check the progress of their training.

For the content sample, we focused on the training within the Fundamentals of Pedagogy subjects. Curriculum theory and methodology (first year of study); Theory and methodology of training. Theory and methodology of evaluation (second year of study).

The first discipline was covered in the academic year 2021-2022, for the most part, online, and the second, in the academic year 2022-2023, through face-to-face activities.

The sample of subjects consisted of 96 undergraduate students at a university in the south-west of Romania.

The purpose of the research was to establish whether in academic training the students perceive that they live an emotional state of well-being or not, and, based on this diagnosis, we aimed to identify and apply, together with the students, ways to reach it.

The main hypothesis we had in mind was that the well-being of our students conditions the effectiveness of their learning.

Because the subjects were involved in both experiences and effects of online and face-to-face training, we also hypothesized that there are differences in the level of self-perception of emotional well-being, depending on each context.

### **5.1. Results of the focus group**

The purpose of the initiated discussions was to capitalize on the fundamental elements of emotional intelligence in achieving well-being in training.

Six focus groups were organized, with 16 students each, each debriefing session lasting approximately one hour, based on 5 key questions/items.

What do you understand by the subjective emotional state of well-being in training? was the opening question of the focus group. Many of the participants explained the difficulty of giving a precise answer, most synonyms being related to the pleasure of participating in activities, the existence of positive experiences, of being good with oneself, being balanced and reconciled from a psychological point of view. Students did not perceive academic emotional well-being as happiness, showing that it is more achievable in an informal context.

An item about the importance of others in creating and maintaining well-being was transposed by asking how important is the social environment for one's well-being? The social environment is made up of the people close to the student who studies at home (parents, siblings), in the university (teachers, colleagues), but also in other situations (for example, other people present in a library).

For most of the students, the answer communicated was to the extent of Much, because they realize the great importance that the internal factor has.

What are the qualities for capitalizing on the external factor? was another question. The recorded answers showed us that, for an optimal relationship, interpersonal communication skills are necessary, also highlighted by the students' preferences for direct, oral communication or indirect, written communication, during examinations, exams.

These answers were complemented by the perspective of accepting negotiation/transactions in interpersonal relationships, as mutually beneficial adaptations in supporting the learning process. In this case, interpersonal intelligence is manifested in I-Other relations, by "giving" or "rejecting", and Other-I, by "asking" or "receiving". Especially in the first year, students stated that they are worse at refusing or asking, but later on they develop those skills.

We mention that, from the perspective of the socialization process or adaptation to the specifics of the new group in the university environment, first-time students go through a phase of exploring relationships with their teachers and colleagues, then of actual compliance and integration from a socio-relational point of view. From a psycho-pedagogical perspective, "In the case of the environment, not only the spatial or temporal aspect must be taken into account, but also the subjective resonance, the attitudinal aspect; everyone selectively establishes the connection with the environment (the personal filter, the reading grid of reality, the structures to meet it)" (Maciuc, 2000, p. 12).

Correlatively, the importance of the Self in creating and maintaining well-being was rated at Very Much. In this case, the students detailed their situations by referring to the existing ability to learn how to obtain satisfactions and to love the learning activity, as part of their personal achievement and self-understanding. There are still many students who considered that self-confidence/esteem did not manifest itself at the level that would have been necessary, but that the state of well-being settles more and more during the academic studies.

Certainly, obtaining good results in evaluations or positive assessments from the teachers gives them confidence and well-being. For example, in the case of four of the respondents, they declared that the lack of self-confidence favors a strongly emotional, disorganizing manifestation before and during the examinations, even if in the usual training activities they are "balanced" participants, well valued by the teaching staff.

A last item of the focus group was about the emotional adjustment solutions applied by the students. The proposed solutions come from self-knowledge and self-acceptance, the correct perception of reality and others, the specification and definition of essential values, the clarification of future projects, the organization and monitoring of one's own activity, the expression of assertive attitudes, the use of physical relaxation techniques, mental control, physical exercises. Control over one's own emotional state of well-being must, in fact, be preceded by the prevention of negative states, by a balanced approach to the problem of the learning tasks, by action on optimizing the use of learning capacities, by motivation, training, as well as by improving typical responses, by self-reward, relaxation, autosuggestion.

## **5.2. Results of the comparison of grades in evaluations**

The main measures used in the formative micro-experiment were to discuss the emotional state of the students – before, during and after the training activity, during the direct activities; to submit to their choices different means/solutions for acquiring well-being; to deepen topics specific to the subjects taught. Such themes, proposed by us, as trainers, were: Education and self-education; Principles, values, educational methods; Effective learning; Self-management of learning; Teaching styles and ways to facilitate learning. Other themes, proposed by the students, as learners, referred to Didactic Communication; Correct assessment; Combating aggression in pre-university education.

Following the didactic activities, for a quantitative illustration of the effects of the experimental measures on the quality of the students' results, we resorted to



comparing the grades obtained by our subjects in two moments of the assessment. Spearman's Rho is a non-parametric test used to measure the strength of association between two variables, where the value  $r = 1$  means a perfect positive correlation and the value  $r = -1$  means a perfect negative correlation. In the case of applying this statistical test to the results of the students in the sample, we obtained  $r_s = 0.4607$ ,  $p$  (2-tailed) = 0. Thus, from a statistical point of view, the association between the variables is considered significant. In statistical testing, string X was represented by the grades obtained by the 96 students in the first assessment (series I), and string Y was represented by the grades obtained by the same sample in the second assessment (series II). From the detailed calculations in Table 1, it appears that the grades covary, in an increasing way, which validates the hypothesis regarding the beneficial effects of awareness and support intervention on obtaining the emotional well-being of the trainees.

**Table 1. Comparative results obtained by the students in assessments**

Times of assessment/Series	Average of grades per each series	Correlation of grades in series I and II
I	Mean 8.85	X Ranks Mean: 48.5 Standard Dev: 26.34
II	Mean 9.35	Y Ranks Mean: 48.5 Standard Dev: 25.21 Combined Covariance = $29063 / 95 = 305.93$ $R = 305.93 / (26.34 * 25.21) = 0.461$

Even if the comparative results obtained by the students in the evaluations indicate progress, because we are referring to a natural micro-experiment, where other external variables that could intervene (including the maturation of the students) could not be isolated, the results they obtained must be interpreted under this reserve, of the impossibility of generalization, especially since they belonged to a small sample, in a short period of time.

## 6. Discussions and conclusions

Current students have been subjected, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, to an ad-hoc change process in the organization, conduct and completion of the academic study programs. The students are aware of the need for changes in their training, but from their perspective, even if, within the focus groups that were held, they formulated a series of viable proposals, the curricular, methodological and managerial solutions are not always coherent, unitary, because they can emerge only after a good knowledge and comparison of the theories, practices or experiences accumulated during this period and in the following years.

It is true that, compared to classical training, online training promotes values that modern European education has in mind: democracy, pluralism, tolerance,

stimulation of dialogue, conflict resolution, values that are subsumed into the culture of the new generation, at the same time being elements of adaptation and students' affirmation. That is why the types of learning passed around more recently, at the European level - cooperative, experiential, reflective learning - were clearly appreciated as useful for ensuring well-being as they were more approved than those existing in classical learning, mostly reproductive. However, if given a choice between the two education options (face-to-face or online), our subjects leaned more in favor of face-to-face education and concluded that a viable option is blended instruction. This perspective of blended learning (Banihashem *et al.*, 2023) represents an approach to training that would bring a balance between the concept of expanding digitization and that of maintaining didactic activities through which students authentically relate to their peers and trainers.

In the future, we believe that a concern for knowing and improving the well-being of teachers or educational management could bring additional explanations, more clearly completing the entire socio-affective context that influences the instructive-educational field at its various levels.

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