Effective Strategies For Teaching Emotional Intelligence In Higher Education
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ABSTRACT

There is a rising call for education to take responsibility for the emotional and social growth of students, from primary school up to higher education (Goleman, 1995; Izard et al., 2001; Liff, 2003; Parker et al., 2004; CASEL, 2003b). This may be partially due to the possible link between emotional intelligence (EI) and academic achievement (Izard et al., 2001; Parker et al., 2004; CASEL, 2003b); the need for education to take a more holistic approach; as well as a need to counteract the alleged “emotional decay” in today’s American society (Goleman, 1995; Greenspan, 1998).

Can higher education make an impact on students’ emotional intelligence? In one study exploring the efficacy of college coursework for improving EI (Chang, 2006), the answer appears to be yes. This study used proven behavioral self-modification techniques in semester-long Psychology of Adjustment courses to help undergraduate college students improve their EI. The courses also included instruction on EI, as well as on theory and strategies from rational emotive therapy. In a MANOVA including change scores (pretest scores subtracted from posttest scores) on three EI tests, the treatment group (n=79) showed significantly more improvement (F = 3.236, p = .001) than the control group (n=74), suggesting their participation in the course contributed to an overall improvement in EI. Other studies have supported the hypothesis that courses on social and emotional functioning produce positive results (Boyatzis, 2001; Boyatzis & Oosten, 2002; Monroy, et al., 1997; Young & Dixon, 1996).

The purpose of this paper is to promote emotional and social learning in higher education by describing the design of the intervention used in the study mentioned above. Strategies for supporting student growth throughout the semester will also be explained in detail.

Recognizing the importance of self-directed change for young adults, proven self-modification techniques (Watson & Tharp, 2006) were taught to help students design and implement their own plans for change. The intervention used a two-level approach to EI. The first level is a set of basic EI abilities (Mayer, Salovey, & Caruso, 2000) that every student should possess in order to function emotionally and socially. The second level is a collection of competencies that have been identified by researchers as possible outcomes of emotional intelligence (Bar-On, 2000; Cherniss, 2000a; Matthews, Zeidner, & Roberts, 2002). Whether students value, implement, or feasibly change the competencies in this second level depends on the students’ context, so they were encouraged to work on a competency that best fits their own situation. Students were taught self-regulation strategies to use for their own plans to improve an emotional competence of their choice.

The concept of self-regulation is woven boldly through models of emotional intelligence. Bar-On (2000) includes impulse control in the Stress Management branch of his model of emotional quotient. Managing Emotions, the highest branch of Mayer, Salovey, and Caruso’s (2000) ability-based EI model, could perhaps be synonymous with self-regulation of emotions. And the Self-Management cluster, including Emotional Self-Control, is one of Goleman’s main emotional competence categories (Boyatzis et al., 2000). This suggests a very strong relationship between self-regulation skills and emotional intelligence.
There were two core components to the intervention. The first was instruction and training in self-modification theory and techniques, using Watson & Tharp’s (2002) Self-Directed Behavior. This textbook is in its eighth edition, with the ninth edition in press, and has been used successfully in psychology courses across the nation for decades. Students were instructed on self-regulation theory, specifying target behaviors for change, observation and recording, antecedent-behavior-consequence analysis, change strategies, shaping, imagined rehearsal, modeling, self-coaching, discovering and using reinforcers, etc. They were guided to discover and target areas for improving emotional intelligence and develop a self-change plan using self-modification techniques. In-class exercises included modeling, case studies, group problem solving, and practice of self-modification techniques.

Students worked on a variety of target behaviors. For example, some students wanted to work on self-regard. They kept track of their emotions and positive and negative thoughts about themselves. They planned to replace negative thoughts with realistic, positive ones, and record times when they successfully did so. Some students worked on assertiveness, keeping track of how often they tried to start a conversation with a classmate or coworker. One very shy international student followed small shaping steps (incremental approximations toward the goal) to practice speaking English, first with other international students, then with a mixed group of international students and native English speakers, then one-on-one with native English speakers. Some students worked on resisting peer pressure to party late at night or to play when they should study. Some students worked on “road rage,” recording times when they got angry on the road, then practicing and recording calming strategies or alternative thoughts. Some students worked on empathy, recording times when they took time to listen to someone and ask questions, and practicing listening techniques. Some students worked on time management, quitting smoking, or losing weight. These were instructed to focus heavily on the emotional aspects of self-control.

The second major component of the intervention was instruction and training in emotional intelligence. Students learned about the different models of EI, application of EI to their own lives, and the value of improving emotional and social skills. They were given feedback on their EI scores from three common validated EI scales at the beginning of the semester. The Emotionally Intelligent Manager (Caruso & Salovey, 2004) was used to help students understand the basic abilities of EI. This book also includes suggestions for improving EI abilities, which students could use as part of their projects. Exercises like emotional charades, case studies, group discussion, rating and describing emotions to each other, and other activities were used in class to train the basic EI abilities. Training in managing emotions was further supplemented by How You Feel is Up to You (McKay & Dinkmeyer, 2002), which discusses the influence of our thoughts on our feelings and also includes suggestions and helpful exercises based on rational emotive therapy.

Students were required to report the status of their plans and brainstorm strategies for overcoming obstacles in many ways.

1. They were required to meet with the instructor one-on-one for half an hour at least once, and up to three times.
2. They were required to turn in worksheets updating their progress
3. A major portion of their grade was based on their main paper about their self-change project. They turned in Part I, the description of their plan, in the first half of the semester, and Part II, the results, at the end of the semester.
4. Each student was part of a “support group,” organized by self-change topics. Support groups were given time in class to discuss the day’s lesson, report the progress of their projects, and brainstorm together for students who were facing obstacles. Support groups built a sense of community through in-class competitions and outside-of-class extra credit projects.
The full paper will discuss the strategies and procedures mentioned above in more detail, including examples and handouts in the appendices.

Undergraduate students can learn to improve emotional intelligence in a semester-long course. The implications of this for student services, college retention programs, and perhaps even remedial programs, are far-reaching. College retention is an important issue for institutions, since only 55% of students who start at an institution stay and finish their bachelor’s degree within six years (U.S. Department of Education & National Center for Education Statistics, 2003). Perhaps EI training could make a difference for student retention, especially in their first year. College freshmen have to quickly become more independent, adaptable, socially adept, assertive, self-confident, and self-controlled in order to succeed. Their environment, responsibilities, rights, and challenges change significantly when they enter college, and it takes much more than academic preparedness to succeed under such instability.