

Emotions in Learning

It is logical that one learns better when interested rather than stressed. However, in today's society with so much emphasis on meritocracy, school-going children are under immense pressure from parents, teachers, peers and even themselves to excel in their studies. Such pressure or negative emotions are not conducive for learning. Many of us would have experienced not being able to understand or recall what we are reading for the examinations due to stress. Whereas, our mind seems to be clearer and our memory stronger when we read up on subjects that we are interested in during our leisure time. The problem is not with examinations but with the emotions.

Ryan, Connell and Plant (1990) conducted 2 studies to examine how emotions would affect [non-directed learning](#).

Findings of 1st study:

- [Interest-enjoyment](#) and [task-involvement](#) were positively associated with perceived comprehension text recall.
- [Ego-involvement](#), shame, [hostility](#) were negatively related to perceived comprehension text recall.

Findings of 2nd study:

- Similar results to study 1 on a larger sample and longer recall period.
- Positive emotions (interest, enjoyment, surprise) led to better comprehension and recall of text over a one-week period.
- Negative emotions (distress, fear, guilt, shame, anger, disgust, contempt) had a negative effect on perceived comprehension and recall of text over a one-week period.
- This pattern was maintained even when effects of [verbal ability](#) were taken into account.

Implications:

From the above studies, it is evident that students comprehend and recall text better if they experience positive emotions and are more task-involved. On the contrary, students do not do well in the comprehension and recall of text when they experience negative emotions and are more ego-involved. It is thus imperative that we enhance students' positive emotions and task-involvement and decrease their experience of negative emotions and ego-involvement to facilitate their learning.

We can do this by...

- Enhancing feelings of interest, enjoyment and surprise.
 - Using interesting activities in the classroom.
 - Using text materials, games or equipment which they would enjoy.
 - Include the element of surprise and excitement in the delivery of the content.
 - I recall an English teacher who made comprehension easier, interesting and motivating for the class just because she narrated the text in a very dramatic and comical way.
 - Understand what interests students and include it into the lesson plan.

- Direct students towards task-involvement.
 - Set goals that help students to focus on the process of the task and their personal improvement rather than comparing or competing with others.
 - Praise students when they put in the effort or show small improvements despite not doing as well as others.
 - Guide students to set their own personal ([performance](#), [process](#)) goals.

- Discourage students' to be ego-involved in their learning.
 - Address the issue with the class if there is a culture of comparing their results with one another and guide them to set performance or process goals.
 - Avoid setting goals where success depends on being better than others e.g. "Throw the ball into the hoop. The student who throws in the most number of times wins." Instead, set more task-oriented goals e.g. "Focus on pushing off with your knees when throwing the ball" or "Aim to throw in at least 5 out of 10 times".

- Refrain from using words, tone and body language which may induce negative emotions or ego-involvement when giving feedback. For example,
 - Feedback such as "Your exam is in 2 month's time and with such results you will never make it to a good school!" would cause distress. Instead, tell the student "I believe you are capable of doing much better. You still have 2 month's to work harder."
 - Instructions such as, "If you don't hand in your work by the end of this lesson, you will have to stay back during your recess or after school to finish it!" causes students to be feel threatened or fearful and they might not be able to concentrate on comprehending what they are reading or doing. Instead, we should tell them "You have 45 minutes to complete this. Read it slowly and imagine the scene in your mind. If you can't finish in time, do not panic, you can still complete it during your break time or after school."
 - Refrain from reacting negatively towards students' failures such as showing anger and disappointment in our facial expressions, tone and body language. This would induce negative emotions in students' such as guilt, distress or shame which impedes their learning further. Instead, focus on giving constructive feedback using the sandwich approach (comments in between encouragement or praises) with positive or neutral emotions. Be patient with students' who progress slower than others and be reminded that it takes time and practice to change and learn.

Key Definitions:

Words	Definitions
Ego-involvement	Motivation for action stems from self-esteem related or external evaluative pressures (Greenwald, 1981).
Hostility	Represented by the discrete emotions of anger, contempt, and disgust, can have "constricting" effects upon cognitive processes, which could potentially reduce the organism's effective assimilation of the field(Izard, 1977).
Interest-enjoyment	Central affective accompaniment of intrinsically motivated behaviours and is maximized under conditions of optimal challenge and absence of extrinsic pressures toward a specific goal (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975; Deci & Ryan, 1985).

Non-directed learning	Learning which occurs in the absence of external prompts, reinforcements, or specific instructions (Ryan, Connell, & Plant, 1990).
Performance goals	Focus on achieving standards or performance objectives independently of other competitors, usually on the basis of comparisons with one's own previous performances. E.g. improving the percentage of successful slice-first serves from 70%-80% (Weinberg & Gould, 2007).
Process goals	Focus on the actions an individual must engage in during performance to execute or perform well. E.g. a swimmer may set a goal of maintaining a long, stretched-out arm pull in her freestyle stroke (Weinberg & Gould, 2007).
Task-involvement	Condition where the motivation for a high level of involvement in an activity stems from its intrinsic properties, such as its challenge or novelty (decharms, 1968).
Verbal ability	Judged according to college records of their Verbal Scholastic Aptitude Test (VSAT) (Ryan et al., 1990).

References:

Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1975). *Beyond boredom and anxiety*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

decharms, R. (1968). *Personal causation: The infernal affective determinants of behavior*. New York: Academic Press.

Deci, E. L., & Ryan, R. M. (1985). *Intrinsic motivation and self-determination in human behaviour*: New York: Plenum Press.

Greenwald, A. G. (1981). Self and memory. *The Psychology of Learning and Motivation*, 15(201-236).

Izard, C. (1977). *Human emotions*. New York: Plenum.

Ryan, R. M., Connell, J. P., & Plant, R. W. (1990). Emotions in non-directed text learning. *Learning and Individual Differences*, 2(1-17).

Weinberg, R. S., & Gould, D. (2007). In *Foundations of sport and exercise psychology* (4th ed., pp. 346). Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics.