

# Emotional Intelligence in the Online Learning Environment

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As faculty, we have a profound impact on the learner experience. We bring our expertise to our classrooms, but do we blend our know-how with emotional intelligence (IQ and EQ)? Applying emotional intelligence within the context of what we do, why we do it, and how we do it helps to create more meaningful experiences that may increase success, satisfaction, and retention. Let's take a deep dive into emotional intelligence within the context of our role as faculty and explore strategies that may positively impact the learning experience.

## What is emotional intelligence?

Mayer (2017) stated "from a scientific standpoint, emotional intelligence is the ability to accurately perceive your own and others' emotions; to understand the signals that emotions send about relationships; and to manage your own and others' emotions," (p. 5). There are a variety of emotional intelligence assessments, such as SEIP, ESCI, EQ-I 2.0, MSCEIT, and EQ Map. Emotional intelligence assessments measure competencies within four distinct areas: self-awareness, self-management, social-awareness, and relationship-management (Boyatzis., Batista-Foguet, Fernández-i-Marín, & Truninger, 2015; Caruso, Mayer, Bryan, Phillips, & Salovey, 2019; Goleman & Senge, 2014; Mayer, Goleman, Barrett, Gutstein, Boyatzis, Goldberg, & Heifetz, 2004; Kaur, Shri, & Mital, 2019)

Founder and President of the Institute for Social and Emotional Intelligence, Dr. Laura Belsten, defined **emotional self-awareness** as the ability to notice and label one's feelings, emotions, or reactions and to connect to the source where the emotions, feelings, or reactions originated. Being able to identify, understand, and assess how one's emotions, feelings, or reactions

impact oneself and others is a valuable insight that can improve relationships and experiences (Boyatzis, et. al., 2015, Caruso, et. al., 2019; Goleman & Senge, 2014). Individuals that have a strong self-awareness: know what, when, and why they feel the way they do and how their emotions impact what they say and do (Belsten, 2016; Boyatzis, et. al., 2015; Goleman & Senge, 2014). Individuals struggling with self-awareness may experience: difficulty understanding their emotions, may get upset quickly/easily, and/or have a hard time with work-life balance (Belsten, 2016). **Emotional self-awareness development strategies may include:** taking an emotional intelligence assessment for a baseline, regularly checking how you are feeling and why, making time for self-reflection, practicing healthy self-talk, seeking and acting upon feedback (Belsten, 2016; Boyatzis, et. al., 2015; Caruso, et., al., 2019).

**Behavioral self-management** is the ability to control one's emotions (Belsten, 2016). Individuals with strong self-management skills showcase: level-headedness, positivity, and focus when faced with hostility or conflict (Belsten, 2016). Individuals struggling with self-management may: react impulsively, be defensive, are quick to judge and/or inadequately resolve problems (Belsten, 2016; Boyatzis, et. al., 2015; Caruso, et., al., 2019; Goleman & Senge, 2014). **Self-management development strategies may include:** keeping a journal that identifies emotions, triggers, and may be used to craft a composure, focus, and productive situational plans (Belsten, 2016; Boyatzis, et. al., 2015, Caruso, et., al., 2019).

**Social awareness**, also known as the awareness of others' emotions and feelings, is the ability to sense what others are feeling (empathy), sense and understand their perspectives within the scope of the situation or organization (organizational awareness), and anticipate their needs (service orientation) (Belsten, 2016). Here, one takes an active interest to learn and understand how others feel or what their thoughts are about a particular situation (Belsten, 2016; Boyatzis, et. al., 2015; Caruso, et., al., 2019); Goleman & Senge, 2014). Individuals that have a strong social awareness demonstrate: active listening, listen and/or observe what is felt, i.e. vibe, empathy to illustrate understanding of others' feelings and perspectives,

and working to reach a resolution based on the specific needs. Individuals that may struggle with social awareness may experience: difficulty understanding the needs of others, selective instead of active listening, act without thinking about others' feelings or perspectives, have difficulty sensing what others may be feeling, and/or may be uncaring. **Social awareness development strategies may include:** practicing empathy, active listening, and communicating with others to develop situational, organizational, and service orientation awareness, (Belsten, 2016; Boyatzis, et. al., 2015; Caruso, et., al., 2019).

**Relationship management** refers to the ability to combine self and social awareness into conductive and rewarding outcomes (Belsten, 2016). Individuals with strong relationship management demonstrate: the ability to sense development needs of others, inspire others, positively influence others, mitigate conflict, and build teams by working with others toward a shared goal (Belsten, 2016; Caruso, et., al., 2019; Goleman & Senge, 2014). Communication is at the heart of relationship management and the ability to listen deeply and openly, including sending clear, credible, convincing messages that provide context, understanding, and direction. Individuals with strong relationship management skills may demonstrate: context-driven communications within the scope of how individuals may perceive or react, actively listen, promote transparent communication, are open to feedback or different perspectives without becoming defensive and communicate in a logical, organized, and clear manner. Individuals that may struggle with relationship management may experience: inability to listen, interrupt, fail to ask for other opinions or are not open to feedback, lack of consideration of others, inconsiderate to other perspectives or feelings, impulsive communications, and/or unapproachable (Belsten, 2016; Boyatzis, et. al., 2015; Caruso, et., al., 2019; Goleman & Senge, 2014). **Relationship management development strategies may include:** reflecting upon coaching, influencing, persuading, inspirational leadership, and conflict management practices that may help to develop trust, improve communications, relationships (individuals, teams, etc.), and performance. (Belsten, 2016; Boyatzis, et. al., 2015; Caruso, et., al., 2019).

## **Where does emotional intelligence appear in the online learning environment?**

Short-answer, everywhere. Learners and faculty experience emotions as a result of every interaction in the online learning environment (Boyatzis, Stubbs, & Taylor, 2002; Boyatzis & Saatcioglu, 2008; Chapin, 2015; Goleman, 2008). The emotional reactions to the interactions impact attitudes, behaviors, and experiences (Goleman, 2008; Kaur, et., al., 2019; Majeski, et. al., 2017; Zhoc, et., al., 2018). Let's look at emotional intelligence within the scope of interactions that arise in the online learning environment. If we look at the online learning experience as a series of interactions and each interaction has an emotional reaction, we can learn more about the emotions of others, and our own emotions within the context of the situation and use that information to manage the experience.

## **How may we foster emotional intelligence in the online learning environment?**

As faculty, we may foster emotional intelligence in our online learning environment by first recognizing what it is and where it comes up in the course. By understanding factors impacting self, social, and situational awareness and management, we can create an intentional, empathetic, and conscientious learning experience. We can also help learners to develop their emotional intelligence. As a result, we help foster greater student self-awareness and model positive EI behavior.

Research tells us a key factor to foster Emotional Intelligence (EI) in a learning environment is **motivation**. Positive psychology research titled "self-determination theory" (Ryan & Deci, 2000) tells us that adult learners have three innate psychological needs that link to intrinsic motivation. These needs are critical to more and better learning for adults:

**Autonomy** – allowing students to have choices and time to make decisions.

**Competence** – succeeding at measured challenges that help to breed success, and lead from beginner to optimal challenges, over a period of

time. We want students to experience that goal achievement, and success, are "ends" in themselves.

**Relatedness** – experiencing mutual reliance and trust in others in the learning experience, like instructors and classmates.

These three needs also play a critical role in how we design and teach content for an optimal EI experience for students. Neuroscience research displays if students start, persist, and put in the mental effort on learning content, the brain will change and learn regardless of whether students "like" the material or not. Compare the effort of learning for the brain to exercise for the body. We may not like working out 30 minutes a day, yet if we start, persist and put in the effort, our muscles and health will improve and change immediately.

Research also tells us of four problematic areas where we need to help *motivate* students and develop deeper EI skills through the learning experience itself (Dede, Richards & Saxberg, p.169, 2019).

**Valuing** – if students value the content in a learning experience, or identify their "why" of taking this experience, they are far more likely to start, persist, and put in the mental effort. We need to engage students in considering "what's in it for them" and identifying what they value will increase their persistence, and ultimately, their competence.

**Self-efficacy** – this item relates to the innate need of competence listed above. If students believe they cannot accomplish something, regardless of how valuable, they may not start, persist, or put in the mental effort. Reversely, learning new information increases a student's self-esteem. We need to emphasize that students can accomplish the task through accomplishing low stakes assignments with timely, good-natured, supportive feedback. We must also build on information previously discussed and learned – relate the previous learning to the current material.

**Attribution** – Another motivational failure are factors learners believe are outside of themselves and their control – learners may attribute the failure to start, persist and put in the effort due to factors – like not enough time, or a sick family member, etc. Educators may intervene to help the student's

problem-solve around the specific issue and role model and display problem solving and tenacity. Instructors may ask the important question of "how may I help you?" and following through with advice and counsel focused on the facts. Role modeling for EI skills to help students overcome attribution issues is invaluable to learners.

**Negative Emotional States** – the most difficult, complex and common situation is when a learner is preoccupied with negative emotional concerns like anger, fear, and depression. Neuroscience and research tell us these issues are prominent particularly for Generation Z learners under the age of 23. Educators support these students with all the professional services available through the University.

### **Why does emotional intelligence matter?**

As faculty, the stronger our emotional intelligence, the more we can positively impact the learning experience. Research studies within the scope of higher education learning environments have found links to greater retention, course completion, and satisfaction (Boyatzis & Saatchioglou, 2008; Boyatzis & Stubbs, 2002; Chapin, 2015; Goleman, 2008; Kaur, et. al., 2019; Meyer & Jones, 2015; Navas, 2014; Parrish, 2015; Quinlan, 2016; Zhoc, et., al., 2018). If we sit back and think about our learner population, and how we, as faculty, can positively impact the learner experience by combining our know-how and emotional intelligence, perhaps, in doing so, we may positively impact retention, course completion, and learner satisfaction.

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