

Emotion Regulation in Academic, Contentious Learning Discussions: Analysis and Effects on the Quality of the Dialogue

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Abstract: Based on a novel design of university level course, we explored the quality of discussions conducted in digital media, and the recollected emotional experiences reported by student. No effect was found for emotion on dialogue's quality. Emotional experiences were affected from the subject of the discussion and from the level and type of participation of group members. Emotions were often shared in intensity but not in valence. Implications for the implementation of contentious discussions in higher education are discussed.

Theoretical background

In recent years, the importance of developing socio-emotional competencies such as understanding, expressing and regulating emotions is increasingly recognized as an educational goal (CASEL, 2013). Classroom discourse, which is widely recognized as a desirable learning approach, can be an appropriate sphere for practicing these competencies, especially within a discourse around controversial issues that produces emotions which need to be regulated. From a different angle, there is widespread recognition of the importance of encouraging classroom discourse around political and controversial issues, as a means to learning to learn together on argumentation and dialogue and as a collaborative skill (Baker, Andriessen, and Schwarz, 2019; Hess, 2002). The importance of learning emotion regulation in heated discussions raises as social networks and digital deliberative spaces become major components of the public sphere creates a need to practice socio-emotional competencies in a way that will refer the specific characters of the e-media (Slakmon & Schwarz, 2019).

In this study we ask three research questions:

- a. Is the quality of written dialogues on controversial issues reported as emotionally significant by students inferior to the quality of dialogues which are not reported as emotionally significant?
- b. What are the factors which evoke emotions during a discussion and what are their characteristics?
- c. To what extent the experiences reported as emotionally significant by individuals participating in educational dialogues about contentious issues, are shared by their interlocutors?

Method and analysis

94 students (13 males and 81 females), of which 20 were Arabs and 74 Jews, participated in the research. They participated in a mandatory undergraduate course that dealt with the practical and political aspects of education in Israel. The educational objectives of the course were for the students to learn to conduct a critical and respectful discussion and to learn about educational research on issues that are controversial in the Israeli context.

The course curriculum contained: (1) Lessons about argumentation for learning, guidelines for productive critical discussions, description of a technological platform for discussions, (2) Invited lectures delivered by researchers who presented controversial educational issues. The lectures were followed by e-discussions in fixed groups of four to six students. Some of the groups were heterogeneous from a gender or ethnicity perspective, and some were homogenous, but we avoided the presence of one unique student from an ethnic minority in the group.

At the end of the course, the students were asked to reflect on their discussions and single out one significant moment and one emotionally loaded moment, and to explain their choices.

The quality of the discussions was evaluated by eight cluster codes from the Scheme for Educational Dialogue Analysis (SEDA; Hennesy et al., 2016; Rojas-Drummond et al.).

Findings

Dialogue quality

16 discussions reported as emotionally significant and 16 non emotionally significant discussions were compared by the following SEDA dialogic categories - Make reasoning explicit and Build on ideas (R+B); Positioning and coordination (P); and Connect (C), in order to check whether the quality of discussions that were reported as

emotionally significant was effected. To these categories, we added the number of turns and the number of words in each discussion. Four other SEDA categories were not compared as their presence was very low. Comparison of the discussions indicates that both kinds of discussions contained a large portion of R+B, P and C moves and there was no statistically significant difference between the two sets of discussions either in the number of R+B, P, C moves, nor in the number of turns and number of words the discussions contained.

Individual and shared emotional experiences

Analysis of students' reflections was made in order find the reasons for which students chose a specific discussion to be significant or emotional. The reasons offered by students for emotion and for significance didn't differ, so we merge them in the analysis. Reasons can be divided into two main categories which often appeared both:

References to the subject of the discussion – the references contained two main aspects, the *objective value or importance of the subject* and the *relevance of the subject to the speaker's life*. These two aspects often coincided,

Specific events – which could be examined by the extent and nature of participation of the writer and the members of the group. Reports that ranged from fully participating to avoiding of both the reporting student and the group. The interaction between the actions of the individual and the group affected the creation of a shared emotion. Shared emotional experiences were defined as cases in which three or more participants referred to the same event as emotional or significant. Eleven of the 16 discussions met this condition. Qualitative examination of the reflections indicates that full participation of the individual and the group led to a feeling of closeness in the group whereas avoiding or upregulating participation led to frustration, hard feelings and feeling of a missed opportunity.

Discussion

This experiment took place in a course which was designed to raise strong emotions in discussions between students from different ethnical groups around controversial issues. Students were asked to report on emotionally significant episodes in their discussions. Our goal was to examine whether emotions will influence the quality of discussion, what will rise emotions in the discussion, and will the emotions be shared or stay in the individual level. No difference was found in quality between emotionally significant and non-emotional discussions. This can imply that given the right instructions, students can conduct a qualitative discussion, in which they reason, build on each other, refer to each other and to other contexts, in the presence of intense emotions. As for the two other research questions, to a large extent, students reported on the same episodes as emotionally significant. This finding suggests that episodes are felt as shared when their intensity is high, but participation of the individual and the group affects the valence and the types of emotions felt. This finding can imply the important role of the teacher as a moderator in learning discourse.

The study leaves many open issues: examining the effect of emotions of different age groups and contexts, the effect of different designs on the discussions, the identification of regulation processes and the way they affect the discussions and more. In spite of these many open issues, it seems that the apparatus we created (digital tools, group arrangements, issues to be discussed, argumentative scripts, etc.) provides a promising venue for the promotion of contexts in which people can be emotionally engaged with very different others in discussions that involve their identities as part of their democratic education.

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