

EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE

The Role of Transformative Learning in Academic Excellence

Gary R. Low

Texas A&M University-Kingsville
College of Education - Rhode Hall 162
Kingsville, Texas 78363
(361) 593-2801
gary.low@tamuk.edu

Darwin B. Nelson

Texas A&M University-Kingsville
College of Education - Rhode Hall 103
Kingsville, Texas 78363
(361) 593-2203
darwin.nelson@tamuk.edu

The Javelina Emotional Intelligence (EI) Program at Texas A&M University-Kingsville described in this article received a national award from the American College Personnel Association (ACPA) as an exemplary program committed to student development, successful transition to college, achievement, and retention.

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In our model, emotional intelligence (EI) is conceptualized as a confluence of learned abilities resulting in wise behavior, high achievement, and mental health. Emotionally intelligent students are skilled in interpersonal communication, self-management, goal achievement, and demonstrate personal responsibility in completing assignments and working effectively (Nelson and Low, 2003). Emotional intelligence is the ability to think constructively and act responsibly. Research consistently has indicated that constructive thinking, assertive communication, time management, goal achievement, commitment ethic, and stress management skills are significant predictors of academic success and tested performance (Nelson and Low, 2003; Nelson, Low, and Vela, 2003; Epstein, 1998). If we want students to develop the skills essential to personal, academic, and career excellence, we will need to provide learning environments for students that are transformative in nature.

Quantifying Emotional Intelligence

In developing our theory of emotional intelligence, the first step was to quantify the concept by developing an assessment approach to identify the specific factors and skills that contributed to emotionally intelligent behavior. Our assessment approaches were developed and validated in school and educational settings. Completed research since 1977 has clarified the contribution of emotional intelligence skills to academic achievement, retention, career effectiveness, and personal well-being (Nelson and Low, 1981, 2003b; Nelson, Low, and Vela, 2003; Low, 2000).

Doctoral research has demonstrated the importance of emotional intelligence skills to academic achievement and tested performance of high school and college students (Stottlemire, 2002; Vela 2003). Emotional intelligence skills such as assertive

communication, self-management, stress management, and positive change are especially important in the transition from high school to college (Low and Nelson, 2004). The Personal Skills Map (PSM), Emotional Skills Assessment Process (ESAP) and the Personal Responsibility Map (PRM), assessments that we have developed and researched, are published nationally and used world wide to help students develop specific skills essential to personal, academic, and career excellence.

Academic Excellence and the Development of Wisdom

The current emphasis on testing in Texas and nationally is supported by an assumption that achievement can be quantified by tests and then teaching and learning effectiveness can be measured by standardized tests. The research is clear regarding the limited ability of test scores to reflect actual performance. While important, a test score is only a partial statement about what a student can learn independently. A student actually can perform much more effectively when assisted by a mentor or dedicated teacher. When we evaluate the effectiveness of teaching and learning, we simply must look beyond actual test scores.

The emphasis on testing is not a current trend, and testing is not an American tradition. More than two thousand years ago, the Chinese were using a battery of tests for selection purposes in their societies. In China, a person could not hold a public office unless the final round of national testing was passed. Today, we use test scores to decide and hypothesize about many things. American children score low when compared to world norms, and we worry about this. Our children score lower because, until recently, they were not spending twelve hours a day studying test related content. Many have concluded that schools and colleges need to more effectively teach specific content to

students so that they can score higher on tests. We argue for a different mentality about testing and about how to improve achievement and academic excellence.

Test scores reflect only a small part of learning that is important in academic success, career effectiveness, and personal well-being. We lose the true concept of education when we equate education and resultant learning to information retention, information transfer, and test taking. We argue for a broader and more inclusive definition of education, academic excellence, and effective behavior.

We want our students to develop wisdom, the ability to think and behave wisely in the present. One does not have to be old to be wise. Young children can learn skills that allow them to behave wisely and effectively, for example interpersonal skills, dealing with strong emotions, time management, goal achievement. In educational circles, there is occasional talk about the importance of critical thinking and the development of character. We refer to the importance of learning emotional intelligence skills and the necessity of including the development of the emotional mind, along with the current emphasis on cognitive information skills, as a part of the teaching/learning process.

Transformative Learning

Transformative learning is learning that transforms the student into an effective person. Transformative learning empowers students to: (1) develop healthy and productive relationships, (2) solve problems and make good decisions, (3) manage self in achieving goals, (4) stay attuned to healthy outcomes, and (5) behave wisely and responsibly. Transformative learning is student-centered and focuses on dialog rather than content drill or power point presentations. The student and teacher engage in dialog, and learning is relevant to the student's frame of reference. The focal point of learning is

active engagement and involving the student in meaningful learning. The early cognitive theorist, Vygotsky, stressed the importance of psychological tools that students could learn to change and improve themselves and their worlds. Transformative learning emphasizes the development of behaviors that students can use to improve themselves and their performance in life and throughout their careers.

The classroom environment for transformative learning is characterized by respect for the individual learner and encourages meaningful engagement dialog. Teaching and learning are viewed as active, cooperative, mutual, and collaborative. The teacher is involved actively in the learning process and learns with students through positive and engaging interactions. A major factor in effective learning is the relationship between the student and teacher.

In our model of emotional intelligence, we refer to this experiential learning process as mentoring. Transformative learning is learning that understands and values the contributions of the emotional mind. Transformative learning allows students to build and actually practice specific skills and competencies, such as constructive thinking, problem solving, goal setting and achievement, stress management, and effectively managing change and transitions.

Emotional Intelligence: A Practical Definition

The publication of Daniel Goleman's book on emotional intelligence (1995) has led to widespread use of EI in business, industry training, and education. Our definition and the positive assessment instruments we use to quantify emotional intelligence are based on extensive research and application studies ranging from 1977-2004 in

education. More than thirty-five completed doctoral studies provide support for the educational applications of emotional intelligence that we have suggested.

Emotionally intelligent behavior is wise behavior. To behave wisely requires the synergistic effect of the emotional mind with the cognitive mind. Thinking and feeling are not totally independent processes, and emotionally intelligent behavior requires a harmony of the two minds. The emotional mind makes many positive contributions to academic achievement, productivity, and mental/physical health. In the sections that follow, we briefly describe some important educational applications of emotional intelligence.

Emotional intelligence, as measured by our assessment instruments, is a series of interrelated skills and competencies. In terms of construct validity, our instruments provide valid and reliable measurements of interpersonal skills (assertive communication), self-management skills (time management, goal achievement, commitment ethic, and personal responsibility), and the intrapersonal skills of self-efficacy and stress management. The general factors assessed may be thought of as indicators of constructive thinking, goal achievement, and personal responsibility or effective self-management.

It is important to note that the EI skills as measured by the assessment instruments are general measures of effective cognitive functioning. Unlike traditional measures of intelligence (scholastic aptitude, achievement) and traditional measures of personality, the assessments provide information about how a student is actually applying cognitive-behavioral skills in daily life. The measured EI skills are extremely important to academic achievement, retention or program completion, and effective interpersonal and

intrapersonal behaviors. Developing these skills will improve a student's performance in school, work, and life.

Academic Achievement

Research with the *Emotional Skills Assessment Process* (ESAP) and *Personal Responsibility Map* (PRM) has indicated that self-management and time management skills are essential to academic achievement and retention. Time management is an emotional intelligence skill rather than a cognitive skill. Students must be taught thinking processes and behavioral skills that allow them to prioritize better and complete assignments on time. Research has identified time management skills as significant predictors of academic success in college (Vela, 2003; Boyle, 2003; Nelson and Nelson, 2003).

Retention of Academic At-Risk Students

Learning and applying emotional intelligence skills are important in improving the achievement and retention of academic at-risk students. The specific skills of assertive communication, time management, goal achievement, commitment ethic, and positive change are essential to the academic and college success of this student group. A recent experimental research study shows significant improvement in emotional intelligence skills as reported by student and teacher ratings with a high school group of academic at-risk students (Smith, 2004).

Emotional intelligence skills are developed best in learner-centered environments characterized by mentoring with a focus on transformative learning. It is essential to engage actively at-risk students in the learning process. Engagement and meaningful learning are possible when students are involved actively in the learning process.

Likewise, motivation and engagement are diminished when at-risk students are unable to relate to or find personal meaning in the instruction of content material. The result is often minimal achievement and higher problem indicators (drop-outs).

Career Counseling and Life Skill Development

The guidance curriculum recommended by the Texas Education Agency is an excellent example of the importance of emotional intelligence skills and the need for a student-centered learning environment. Individual and classroom guidance activities are focused on developing essential behaviors for academic, career, and personal excellence. Effective life skill development requires transformative learning and mentoring. Combining mentoring with transformative learning occurs on an individual and group basis as a result of student involvement in leadership and structured experiential learning activities. Effective career counseling and life skill development is best learned through a comprehensive and systematic instructional program or curriculum that includes the key skills and competencies of emotional intelligence.

Effective Transition from High School to College

Our research suggests that we need to design and implement transition programs in high school to help bridge the gap between high school graduation and enrollment in the first semester of college (Low and Nelson, 2004). College retention rates are not likely to improve unless specific skill development programs are initiated before and during this critical transition period. Research indicates that assertive communication, time management, goal achievement, commitment ethic, and stress management skills are essential to academic achievement and college success (Vela, 2003; Elkins and Low,

2003; Nelson, Low, and Vela, 2003). Developing these skills requires transformative learning emphasizing constructive thinking and emotionally intelligent behavior.

Summary

Emotional intelligence skills are key factors in personal, academic, and career excellence. Texas educators in public schools, community colleges, and universities are committed to achieving high standards of academic achievement, teacher and student productivity, and responsible behavior. Our long-term and current research calls for the inclusion of emotional intelligence skills and competencies to be delivered in a transformative learning environment in schools and colleges for students and in preparing effective teachers and administrators.

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