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Emotional intelligence

Betty Rudd

Introducing emotional intelligence

When I was a little girl at primary school, my headmaster stood me in front of the whole school. He shouted at me for everyone to hear: ‘You’re stupid! Un-teachable! If I had my way, you’d be out working, not wasting tax-payers’ money in school!’

I hung my head, shamed, unable to express myself. I was not emotionally intelligent. With hindsight and years later, I realised that neither was he.

Definition

What is emotional intelligence (EI)? The term is vague because of different, yet similar, definitions. For example, according to Petrides, it embraces well-being and self-control (Petrides and Furnham, 2003). For Salovey, another expert, it is understanding and managing emotions (Salovey and Grewal, 2005). Wikipedia defines EI as ‘the ability … to identify, assess and manage the emotions of one’s self and others’ (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Emotion). Overall, it seems to mean being able to feel your emotions, read those of others and deal with them appropriately.

If my headmaster had had these abilities, he might have asked to see me alone, to problem-solve, while keeping us both OK. If I had had EI, I could have stood up for myself. From that school day onwards, I truanted as much as possible for my remaining school years. Consequently, my school learning suffered; reading was difficult until relatively late. Different learning happened, though, such as how not to be noticed. Logically, it follows that learning and EI are linked.

History

Where does the concept of EI stem from? Initially, a developmental psychologist, Dr Gardner: conceived the theory of multiple (seven) intelligences (1993):

- Linguistic
- Logical/Mathematical
- Musical

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Then, a paper focusing on EI, which is part of Gardner’s (1993) *Interpersonal Intelligence*, was presented at a conference by two relatively unknown academics: Mayer and Salovey (1993).

Later, EI tests started being published (e.g. Bar-On, 1996). Yet it was not until 2003 that EI workshops were facilitated by one of my old teachers, Dr Steiner, through a process of interacting authentically, while keeping self and others OK. More recently, in the UK, the concept of EI spread in state schools through ‘circle time’ with resources for facilitating it (e.g. Rudd, 2010).

**Theory and research**

The theory behind Steiner’s work is that social adeptness stems from emotional literacy, which is the scaffolding for success in relationships (2003). Currently, theory is ahead of research. This is due to two reasons. First, investigators have yet to agree on a clear meaning of EI. Second, the field is in the process of rapid growth.

**Centrality of emotions**

Although it is challenged whether EI is an intelligence at all, the notion of the centrality of emotions is not new. Darwin was one of the earliest investigators who recognised the importance of non-cognitive intelligence (1898). He realised that it was crucial for surviving and adapting.

From his time to the twentieth century, there is a lack of literature on EI because cognitive intelligence was deemed most important, but in 1920 a psychologist, Thorndike: highlighted the importance of ‘social intelligence’: the skill of understanding and managing others (1920).

More recently, research findings show that feeling fulfilled acts as a buffer for warding off illness and mental distress (Chopra, 2005; Heru, 2006; Bloom, 2007). The source of the ‘umbilical cord’ that emotions are attached to is the amygdala, which processes emotion in the brain. The brain’s chemicals can continue pumping days after a distressing emotion. It is not uncommon to have a cold within a week after an upset with a partner: emotional upset causes a weakened immune system. Mounting research shows that the body’s physiology is related to emotional state (e.g. Kenneth and Sabin, 1997; Chopra, 2005; Stamm, 2007).

**Positive affect**

Research and theory confirm the favourableness of positive emotional experiences such as good attention, sensitive communication and adequate bonding, right from infancy (Stamm, 2007; and Gilbert, 2010). Norman Cousins: a medical doctor, reports in his book his self-experiment of curing himself of a cancer that his doctors described as ‘incurable’, by experiencing joy, compassion and love (2005). He activated his endorphins, facilitating recovery (Bloom, 2007). He described how he felt joy because he laughed daily, compassion because he experienced it for himself, love because he loved himself enough to change his attitude. These experiences nourished his brain, releasing opiates, endorphins and hormones such as oxytocin, boosting overall health (Gilbert, 2010). Cousins’s story is a powerful testimony on how emotions, such as happiness, help with healing (2005).

Emotionally intelligent people experience ups and downs in life, just as those who are not emotionally intelligent. Like Cousins (2005): they tend to bounce back from adversity more so than those without
good-enough EI, perhaps by managing emotions aptly (Batmanghelidj, 2007; Goleman, 2004; Ross, 2008; Rudd, 2008 and 2009; Steiner, 2003).

**Negative affect**

Without EI, mental problems develop more easily (Goleman, 2004). Those with good-enough EI handle negative emotions and go through difficult times, rather than becoming overwhelmingly stressed, while those without good-enough EI are more likely to stop learning and become ill (Goleman, 2004; Meyer and Damasio, 2009). There is a strong argument that productivity also suffers if EI is low (Weisinger, 1997).

**Hard-wired emotions**

Expressing emotion is natural. Research led by Professor Schyns (2009), Director of the Centre for Cognitive Neuroimaging within the Department of Psychology at Glasgow University, shows that facial expression is hard-wired for six basic expressions:

- Happiness
- Fear
- Surprise
- Disgust
- Anger
- Sadness.

His research (Schyns, 2009) backs up others, such as that of Ackerman and Izard (2004), whose findings also revealed that basic emotions are hard wired. They rationalised that all other emotions are derived from these six. Schyns concludes that we use our perception of these innate emotions to make crucial social decisions (2009). Managing emotions though, is not innate but learnt (Gerhardt, 2007).

**Neurological research**

A neuroscientist, Joseph LeDoux: investigated emotions, brain and memory (2003). His research shows that, although stressful emotions such as fear and anxiety block learning to make way for the stress fight/flight response, positive emotions are conducive to learning. Investigations by cognitive neuroscientists such as LeDoux reveal that emotions and cognitions are interconnected during the learning process, influencing motivation, learning disorders, memory, self-discipline and academic problems (2003).

**Lifestyle, emotions and learning**

If we manage emotions aptly, we can live the rest of our lives more optimally. I can best explain this with an example from personal experience. At a time when I was not carving out my life suitably I became unwell with symptoms such as fatigue (my adrenal functioning was exhausted) and thyroid problems causing much of my hair to fall out (due to dealing unsatisfactorily with stress). Fortunately, I learned to purposefully change my lifestyle, enabling recovery.

Cousins’ story inspired me (2005). With help, I designed a wellness programme that included going to a place where I experienced support and had plenty of sunny fresh air. All my senses were fed daily in an enhancing way, allowing new learning, while pacing my outdoor physical activity, relaxing and becoming more positive. Within a month, I and others were astonished that I did not need medication or surgery.
Leaders in the EI field have developed the concept of the importance of emotions and linked it to mental and physical health (e.g., Gerhardt, 2007; and Chopra, 2005).

**Relaxation and emotional robustness**

Relaxing aids overall health because it decreases stress, thereby aiding emotional robustness. Deep breathing occurs if relaxed. The hypothalamus’ cascade of stress response is interfered with by breathing deeply. Therefore, relaxation is incompatible with the stress response; changing negative thinking to positive also interferes with it (Zantra, 2004).

One way to relax is to sit in a physically relaxed and comfortable way, then to meditate so that the body learns to be aware and recognise that relaxed state; it is important to sustain that state of relaxation for a few minutes. When practised daily, it becomes possible to revisit that relaxed, meditative state, if emotionally ruffled (Goleman, 2004).

**Emotional disclosure**

Realising our emotions and appropriately disclosing them within relationships is good for overall wellness. The work of Dr Ornish and his team, which includes the conditions of paced physical movement, daily meditation, a healthy diet and emotional disclosure, shows significant health differences between those who do and those who do not disclose affect, irrespective of other conditions (1996). His research with adults illustrates repeatedly that disclosing emotions and problems, particularly the ones most difficult to share, prolongs life (Ornish, 1996; Aldana et al., 2004). We can deduce from this that emotional literacy can be learnt in adulthood.

**Developmental EI**

Emotional literacy can be developed in adults, and also nurtured in youngsters. Educationalist James Park found a correlation between creativity and EI; and he has created guidelines for what to include in an EI programme for children (2004). There is also a more recent complete programme for teaching EI, for those aged four to 19 years (Rudd, 2008). Intriguingly, the work of Gerhardt shows that EI seeds can be sown before birth (2004).

**Pre-birth**

While baby is in utero, if mother feels content (perhaps due to adequate support) then the fetus is not flooded with stress hormones. A stressed pregnancy can result in premature birth and or diminished fetal brain development (Lexington et al., 1999; Gerhardt, 2007).

**0 to 3 years**

We are born to be compassionate, as Pert’s (1997) research on mirror-neurons and Gilbert’s (2010) on compassion show. There is a relatively large amount of recent research showing how patterns of neuronal networks and the brain are shaped by early emotional experiences (e.g., Gerhardt, 2004; Cozolino, 2007). Normally, from birth to three years, children should be able to call for care, such as crying or indicating another way to get their needs met. They should also be able to express their happiness by smiling or laughing, accept nurturing touch, trust caring adults and show wanting to live through exploring their environment by using all their senses and eventually start thinking for themselves.
To assist with this process, teachers and carers can provide on-going care, ensuring that the child’s senses are stimulated aptly. It is important to be reliable, trustworthy and to glean support if unsure how to respond (Gerhardt, 2007; Rudd, 2009).

4 to 7 years

Children in the four-to-seven-year age range can normally be expected to build on what they have previously assimilated. They can be expected to assert their identity as separate from others, perceive information about the world and themselves and use their power in order to affect relationships. They tend to have the ability to focus on immediate goals, such as wanting attention immediately, while their self-awareness grows. They can look forward to a future event such as a birthday party, smile when smiled at and want to offer comfort if they see a distressed child. They should be able to name their feelings of joy, sorrow and anger (Park, 2004; Rudd, 2008).

To help in the development of EI, teachers and carers can acknowledge and respond aptly to appropriate behaviour and affirm the children in their developmental tasks. It is important to teach that it is OK to have emotions and to support creative play, while clarifying the difference between fantasy and reality. Providing correct answers to questions asked and having clear boundaries can also support the development of EI.

8 to 12 years

Expect children aged eight to 12 to build on their previously assimilated knowledge. Also expect them to tend to learn from mistakes while accepting what is good enough, to listen and think, to know why they want or need something and to follow rules set at school and home. They can normally be expected to face the consequences of rule-breaking, experience still being wanted while disagreeing with someone, know when to run away, keep going or stand firm, and develop their ability to co-operate. They can be expected to take turns, wait for what they want, plan short-term goals such as learning a poem by heart to recite it, ask for help when needed, deal with their own and others’ emotions and answer questions appropriately about a story they have listened to (Rudd, 2008).

It is important for teachers and carers to teach conflict-resolution and problem-solving, and give nurturing strokes for the learning taking place, thus encouraging children’s skills development. They can also clarify that part of learning has to do with making mistakes. They should be consistently reliable and challenge negative behaviour, respecting the children’s perspectives and allowing discussion.

Teens

Teenagers can build on their previously assimilated knowledge and by now should be expected to know that emotion, behaviour and thought are different. They should know what their and others’ emotions are and be able to deal with them. Normally, one would expect them to have the ability of delayed gratification, plan for short- and long-term goals, and keep healthy boundaries between themselves and others.

To help teenagers develop EI they need to experience being in charge of what they do. It helps if they can feel self-empowered by experiencing being in charge. By adulthood the more subtle emotions, such as jealousy and embarrassment, should be identifiable (Rudd, 2008).

Learning to expand EI

How can we raise EI? By socialising with emotionally literate individuals! We can notice those (whether real or fictional, in books, or films) with EI and learn from them. We can practise opening the heart, being
forgiving and having compassion (Gilbert, 2010). It is important to acknowledge and manage affect, be solution-focused and cope well with interpersonal relationships (Rudd, 2008), sharing even the deepest feelings (Gozolino, 2007).

**Why is EI important?**

EI is essential for health, facing problems courageously, transposing destructive energy into creative behaviour, managing depression and creating friendlier classes (e.g. see Seligman, 2005). EI is important for creating a social environment in which relationship difficulties are dealt with compassionately, and well-tuned attention and kindness are shown towards self and others (Gilbert, 2010). Attention is easier when we feel positive, irrespective of age (Hardiman, 2003; Batmanghelidjh, 2007). Attending to anything when distressed is difficult.

**Soma and emotion**

What is manifested physically can reflect inner emotions. For example, babies cry when unhappy and smile when happy. If we make babies feel happy, it grows their physical circuitry to help them have life-long positive emotions (Goleman, 2004). Communicating in a way that honours your and others’ emotions also has desired outcomes for individuals with mental problems or somatic illnesses (Hsu, 2006).

Emotions can be harmful, and too much stress causes harm, for example, road-raged people tend to drive badly and have more road traffic accidents. Emotions such as fear and anger, unsatisfactorily dealt with, are harmful (Goleman, 2004). Conversely, positive authentic emotions are beneficial in person-to-person relationships and also have a positive physical impact on the heart (Goleman, 2004; Ornish, 1998). Research findings show that authentic positive emotions are health-boosting (e.g. Zantra, 2004).

**What’s love got to do with it?**

When experiencing positive emotions, for instance love-feelings, such as empathy, love, appreciation, care, happiness and compassion, we become healthier. Love-feelings slow down aging, dilate blood vessels, reduce heart rate, decrease stress hormones, help relaxation and boost the body’s effectiveness to cope better with stress (Beech, 1999; Gilbert, 2010).

When individuals were asked to focus on love-feelings, the rhythms of their hearts changed for the better and affected body organs. Stress hormones and heart rate decreased while blood vessels became less constricted. Focusing on love-feelings resulted in less deterioration of internal organs and nerves, irrespective of other factors such as age or smoking (Beech, 1999; Medalie and Goldbourt, 1976; Medalie et al., 1992; Russek and Schwartz, 1997; Ornish, 1998). This research indicates the importance of supporting individuals to focus on managing their emotions in a healthy way that is conducive to their overall health.

Emotion affects hormone levels. Positive emotions reduce the stress hormone cortisol while increasing the anti-aging hormone DHEA. DHEA protects and regenerates much of the body’s system while combating the effects of growing old (McCrate et al., 1998; Gilbert, 2010). We can use EI to glean love-feelings by using our imagination to create positive emotions such as joy, love and compassion, thereby releasing healthy hormones (Gilbert, 2010).

We can decrease many unwanted symptoms, such as sleep problems, rapid heart rate, tiredness, indigestion, tension, aches and pains, by manifesting love-feelings (Beech, 1999; Gilbert, 2010). Research shows that people suffering from hypertension can achieve normal blood pressure levels without medicine within six months by manifesting love-feelings daily (e.g. Beech, 1999). This is intelligent use of emotions.
Emotional health’s hinge-pin

A hinge-pin to being emotionally healthy is using EI daily, thereby making it part of normal living! If emotions are not expressed there can be increased illness as the immune system becomes less robust (Goleman, 2004; Chopra, 2005; Cousins, 2005).

Implications of research, theory and practice

Neurological research from the early twenty-first century has implications for learning and emotions, giving a clear indication of the effect that others can have on our emotions (Jensen, 2008; Meyer and Damasio, 2009). Teachers have a particularly important role in influencing our emotions in both positive and negative ways. It follows therefore that their own emotional state has an effect on students’ learning. We need emotionally intelligent teachers, aware of the balance of power and how to make positive emotions central for optimum learning experiences.

What is important is utilising research results on emotions to teach more effectively. Teachers who are emotionally literate exhibit a higher level of skilfulness in their teaching practice (Hardiman, 2003). The implication is to teach teachers how to be emotionally literate, so that they can more skilfully teach learners how to learn.

There is little in the literature on practically linking emotions with learning. In practice I have facilitated this link using drama while building social skills. Crucially, compassion flowed if there was emotional pain, and I used positive emotions to stoke up the learning process. There is a strong implication from literature and practice that compassion is paramount if emotional pain is present and that positive emotions should be used for firing up learning (Gilbert, 2010).

If we experience a learning situation as threatening, our ability to learn is profoundly diminished because we feel intimidated and so cannot experience the freedom to think creatively in that emotional state (Gilbert, 2010). From this understanding the implication is that, for inter-connective complex processes to occur during learning, it is best for learners to perceive themselves as being in charge of their learning. I remember one of my tyrannical instructors. He had power and control, shouting while towering over me. In that situation I did whatever seemed to please the instructor, feeling too chained by him to learn. The implication is that an emotionally literate teacher has control over the class so that there is order, while purportedly equalising power to produce a creative space for learners to feel free in expressing themselves, ask questions and learn.

Balance of power

Even how instructors arrange the learning environment impacts on whether the mode of instruction is authoritarian or not. If there is more balance of power, the less threatened learners feel, thus they are more open to learning. A challenge to instructors is to sit at eye-level among a circle of learners. When I have done this I often colourfully decorated the learning environment, using for example balloons on the door, some flowers and a colourful cloth, especially the higher the level of establishment worked for, as it tended otherwise to be environmentally ‘sterile’. This approach went down well with my students, but was something of a novelty to the university in which I worked.

Concluding discussion

Emotions inform whether things are good or bad. They enable us to have positive or negative experiences of what we perceive, giving us the option to attend to what is good, rather than bad, for us. Emotional expression is a human need mainly requiring a safe place for manifestation and should take centre stage in learning.
Within the Western world, emotions have been a ‘second-class citizen’ compared to intellectual, technological and leadership abilities. Yet, what is important is the ability to keep self and others OK. This includes being able to heal relationships, reciprocity and love. Good-enough emotional literacy, which can be learnt, embraces these abilities.

Learning to be emotionally intelligent can start in babyhood (and even before!) by being cultivated in the home, continued throughout childhood and into adolescence, where it can be taught in schools, and then nurtured at professional institutions in adulthood. For instructors, the challenge is to teach inspiring, even to older learners who expect and are used to the old lecture-mode way.

**Vision**

My vision is that it will not be unusual to use what is known about emotions and understood from cognitive neuroscience to improve learning, inform the workplace and enrich parenting. In educational institutions teaching would occur socio-emotionally on a widespread scale for improving behaviour, cognition and outcomes.

**Exercises and games**

Having taught socio-emotionally for decades, I have repeatedly witnessed astonishingly positive results with individuals and groups (including those whom society had locked away). For instance, a favourite way of learning counselling skills that are remembered is to teach using fun exercises that I created, such as ‘shoot the counsellor’. With younger people, I play games such as ‘catch the dragon’s tail’ to teach self-discipline and boundary-keeping, while keeping self and others OK.

**Change emotional states**

Although the brain creates emotional states, they can be regulated. From my experience, students are more open to learning if I initially facilitate changing their emotional states to one more conducive for learning. This also helps them self-regulate. Self-regulation involves self-discipline which is useful for achieving. The psychologist Dr Seligman, who has conducted good research projects on emotions, concludes, along with Dr Duckworth, that self-discipline out-does IQ (Duckworth and Seligman, 2005). Excitingly, what we are learning about emotions can revolutionise our understanding of the role of affect within education.

**Easier learning**

How can emotions be used intelligently so that it is easier to learn? Gratitude is good for health and if we are healthy we can be more open to learning than if we are unhealthy or focusing on discomfort. Similarly, if we laugh, we are probably happy and relaxed, thereby making learning easier. Emotion affects attention and attention affects memory (Stamm, 2007). For easier remembering, unleash positive emotions at the time of learning (LeDoux, 2003).

We expect schools to deliver learning, decision-making, social functioning, memory and attention. These are subsumed and therefore profoundly influenced by emotional processes, and emotionally related processes have to be involved if skills learnt in schools are to be transposed into the outside world.

A skilled educator would be able to draw on a range of sense experiences in supporting their students’ learning, such as the sounds of nature, smelling sea air, seeing beauty in colourful flowers, tasting deliciously fresh water, feeling the sun’s warmth. These experiences involve all the senses pleasurably. If pleasure is linked with learning, learning is easier. Positive emotional involvement, such as excitement...
within a trusting environment, can also be integrated with sensual experiences for facilitating easier yet profound learning.

**Hooks**

I trust that, as our understanding of neurobiological relationships grows, it will help provide a springboard for innovative designs for the environments of learning. From my experience, meaningfully integrating arts into the instruction of content, can elicit enthusiasm for optimum learning. Teacher-training should include how to use emotional ‘hooks’ to engage trainees in exciting sessions, fostering productive environments for promoting and getting ‘hooked’ on learning (Ross, 2008).

**Future avenues**

Possible future avenues to explore include eliciting positive emotions before teaching students, for example by using short film clips, music, story-telling, writing about a happy event or thinking about something positive. It is also possible to foster motivation in learners by engaging their curiosity by creating a few surprises in the teaching session, such as humour and mystery, for developing emotional connections to make biochemical links with memory. It is important to build confidence in learners, for example, by starting with what they already know so they feel comfortable and safe before taking them to new ground and thereby enabling them to connect existing knowledge with new information.

I declare with my heart and mind: any theory of learning should embrace EI!

**References**


