The significance of emotions in ‘formal’ learning throughout the lifecourse

By Heather Hodkinson
University of Leeds


Please address all correspondence to:
Heather Hodkinson
Lifelong Learning Institute,
School of Education,
E.C.Stoner building,
University of Leeds,
Leeds,
LS2 9JT.
UK

Phone: 0113 3433598
Fax: 0113 3433246
Email: H.D.Hodkinson@Leeds.ac.uk

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Introduction

This conference has been set up to engage with issues around emotional dimensions of learning and of researching the learning lives of adults. After working for three and a half years in the ESRC Learning Lives research project, I find that the issue of emotions is unavoidable. For a start the coordination of a big and diverse project team has inevitably raised emotions. In conducting the research we have been interviewing people about their life stories and ongoing lives. This has at times involved emotions for both researcher and researched, as difficult and sometimes unresolved episodes have been remembered and retold. Sometimes a degree of dependence has grown up between researcher and respondent. Elsewhere in the stories told there are emotions remembered but not necessarily relived. Events recalled have involved learning of one sort or another. For me the experience of working on this project has reinforced the view that learning is embedded throughout life, and that traumatic life events and difficult transitions will, sometimes in complex ways, result in learning. Emotions have pervaded the project.

The particular sample of people that I was working with were selected because, at the time when the project started, they were taking part in adult education classes of some sort. They are also mainly in an “older” age group with long stories to tell. Using this particular sample has allowed me to restrict this paper to the role of emotions in relation to formal education. In doing so I am able to make good use of the information provided by this group of people without producing a paper excessively broad in scope.

In order to do this I will:
1. Step back and describe the project and my involvement with it.
2. Consider briefly what I mean by learning and more specifically by formal learning
3. Use case studies from the research, one in particular, to illustrate some of the ways in which emotions are interwoven with the learning associated with formal classroom situations.

The Learning Lives Research Project

“Learning Lives: Learning, Identity and Agency in the Life-Course” is a major education research project funded in Britain by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) under its Teaching and Learning Research Programme (TLRP). It started in 2004 and is now drawing to a close. In a collaboration between small teams from 4 Universities - Brighton, Exeter, Leeds and Stirling - we aimed to deepen understanding of the meaning and significance of learning in the lives of adults, and to identify ways in which their learning could be supported and enhanced. To do this we examined a range of learning experiences – formal, informal, tacit, incidental - from the perspective of adult learners, set within the context of their unfolding lives.
The qualitative data collection involved life history interviews and interviews about ongoing life and learning over a 3 year period, with more than 100 adults over the age of 25. The sample included men and women of varied age, ethnicity and social class, varied educational achievement and occupational status. They were interviewed first in a very open way about their life story. The interviews were as unstructured as possible to allow interviewees to tell their own stories in their own ways. However the starting point was that they knew that the project was about learning and that we wanted to know their life stories. In succeeding interviews the initial life story has been elaborated and refined and additional information sought in a slightly more structured way, building on the earlier interview(s). In addition, by using a series of interviews over a 3 year period we have been able to follow each person’s ongoing life as it happened.

There was a quantitative element to the study. This involved analysis of data from the ongoing British Household Panel Survey. For the purposes of this particular conference that is only relevant as background. (See MacLeod & Lambe 2006)

The qualitative data provides a great deal of information about people’s lives. The life history data, being retrospective, is usually patchy with a lot of detail about some periods, a quick skim across others, and inevitably a great deal not covered at all. A few hours is not long to tell the story of 50, 60, 70 years, so the scale of cover is quite small. The stories have been told at a particular time and for a particular purpose in the context of a particular present, which affects what is included and how the story is told. The information about the ongoing 3 years of life is told at a somewhat bigger scale – there is the scope for more detail and more events (and non-events) to be covered. In either case there is a tendency for more dramatic events with long term effects to be recalled and recounted. These are often emotionally charged. In many such events there is evidently a process of learning taking place. The data is so rich that there are many areas I could look at in which emotions and learning are interwoven, but I have chosen to look at the specific area of the relationality of emotions and formal learning.

Learning and ‘formal’ learning

Firstly I need to state what must be obvious, that I do not understand learning as a purely cerebral process, even when it is learning that takes place in formal settings like schools and colleges and classrooms. It is a process which is embedded in social situations, practices and activities. In previous research projects learning as participation (Sfard, 1998) and other versions of situated cognition such as Lave and Wenger’s ideas on Communities of Practice (1991), proved to be valuable tools when we looked at the learning of experienced schoolteachers. At the same time we found that it was important to include effects of and effects on individuals and their dispositions, in understanding how learning was working in such communities (Hodkinson et al, 2004). The very nature of the current project puts the focus much more strongly on the individual, but in terms of learning we are not just seeing individual minds being filled with knowledge. The data we have sits comfortably with learning as situated, relational and embodied as described by Beckett & Hager (2002), and as part of a process of becoming (Hodkinson, 2007).
For any individual learning involves mind, body and emotions and is embedded in social and physical situations and practice. The individuals involved are affected by and affect the broad context in which they are operating. Their histories are part of the context and their dispositions (built up through their own history) influence what and how they learn. A person’s dispositions (in the Bourdieuan sense) are formed throughout their earlier life and go on being formed in ongoing and new situations. Learning involves the whole person, not just their cognitive development, and is affected both by the current situations and by earlier experiences and dispositions.

Even formal learning is best understood as embodied and the emotional as an important dimension of that. Emotions are a significant but often neglected part of a persons dispositions, and their dispositions influence and are influenced by learning. On the one hand, emotions, as part of dispositions, influence the ways in which people react to opportunities for formal learning, and the ways they engage with any such provision. On the other hand, the processes of involvement in formal learning can have a significant emotional impact, which may feed into life more generally. This impact can be positive or negative, from the perspective of the learner.

In talking about formal learning I am talking about something for which there is no clear agreed definition. There are definitions put forward by the EU for formal, non-formal and informal learning, but there is no simple adherence to this. As Colley et al. showed (2003), and several recent experiences of my own have confirmed, the terms formal and informal are imprecise when applied to learning. In practice they overlap, and attributes of both occur in most learning situations. The ‘formal learning’ I am talking about in this paper concerns practices that are explicitly structured for learning, such as courses, in locations intended for learning such as classrooms, normally led by a teacher.

Case Study 1, “Tony Wilf”

I have talked about Tony before at an ESREA conference but his experiences illustrate so well some of the things I want to say here about formal learning, that I shall consider his case in detail from this point of view, and then add some material from others of my respondents.

Tony is now in his late 50s. He grew up in one of the poorer areas of Leeds, and has spent most of his life in manual and manual related occupations. As a child, his experience of school was poor and it is only in the last few years that he has returned, enthusiastically, to formal classes. One of his reasons for becoming part of this project was that he felt so strongly about the way he was treated at school and about the importance of getting a second chance at education.

He started life in a small terraced house without indoor sanitation, but whilst he was still a small child the family was rehoused to a prestigious mass housing development of flats. Home life was very positive. There were strict rules but he had a great time playing within the relatively safe environment. He went to a catholic primary school. He doesn’t remember a lot about it but at the age of 11, arrived at secondary school with poor literacy skills. From this point his education seems to have stalled completely.
all the good, or the clever ones, were sat right at the front. The ones who weren’t as clever as the clever ones were in the middle rows and the rest of us were sat on the back and so every time there was a question asked or you needed to know something, you’d put your hand up, you were told to wait a minute but the minute never came and the more you sat there with your hand up, the more you were ignored. You got to a point where you thought “why bother?”

And when ever we were doing anything in school you were never included because you weren’t one of the sparkly ones.

He had a particular problem because his older brother got on well at school. He found being compared to his brother particularly annoying. It had a negative effect on his attitude to school not the positive one the teachers must have hoped for.

I was told “you’re not like your brother”, “your brother don’t do this”, and I was trying to say to them, “but I’m not my brother,” you know, “I’m the one that needs help and I’m asking you for help but you’re not giving it to me.” But because I were a kid and I couldn’t talk to them on that level it were just hold your hand out and have cane and off you go.

He started copying homework and missing classes and found that he got away with it. He was frequently in trouble for misbehaviour and was frequently caned by the headteacher or made an example of, in front of the whole school. He explained how the way to get through such treatment was to pretend that it was not painful, and become a bit of a hero to other pupils. However it was painful both mentally and physically. It hurt him to have to believe that he was “thick” (stupid). In spite of the bravado, it hurt to be always in trouble, and to keep receiving physical punishment.

I think they let me down, because I don’t class myself as thick, but I was told time and time again by teachers “you’re thick, you don’t understand, you’re thick”. [I think], “If I don’t understand explain it to me, probably then I will understand it”

If somebody had said, you know, “Right, what’s the problem?”...and if they’d have said “yeh I’ll give you 5 minutes…” Or maybe, “I’ll explain it to you after class, just sit there and I’ll come back and I’ll tell you.” Fine if they’d have done that. But to be snubbed and sort of say “no” or “go away, it doesn’t matter, you’ll never understand that, you’re thick”. …But as a kid you couldn’t answer back, or if you did answer back you were off marching again to go for the cane...and that’s the only thing I remember from school is seeing the man with the cane, you know. There were never no pat on the head “oh you’ve done well there”.

His recent attendance at community education classes has probably increased his awareness of what was wrong with his schooling. He has realised that he is not really “thick”. He is aware of the fact that his failure at school affected the rest of his life. And he is bitter about this.

I was classed as thick at school so it was expected that I would never get a decent job you know so I mean, all my life I’ve sort of ducked and dived. I’ve had silly little jobs here and there but if I’d have had the education then probably I could have got a decent job.

Tony’s working life was actually quite a lot happier than this quote suggests.
I worked on the Highways Department for years and that was a great experience… The bunch of lads that you worked with it were brilliant. I mean you could work all over the city and so you always got different surroundings… And we’d do 20 ton a day, digging out. And then putting the tarmac back. You never felt hard done by, because you were always laughing and joking.

When he suffered a serious injury in that job, the council found him a sedentary job organising a team of workmen to carry out emergency repairs to council property overnight. Here he was able to continue to enjoy camaraderie with manual workers. However in the end he moved on, mainly to driving jobs, for two reasons. Firstly the night shifts meant he hardly saw his wife and children, and secondly his poor literacy meant that as keeping records became more and more important he struggled to cope. He is very aware now that if he had been able to read and write properly he could have progressed in either of these jobs.

It was a series of traumatic events that eventually resulted in his return to education. He knows he could have gone to evening classes a long time ago. He had contacts in the world of education – his sister-in-law was a community education tutor, and his wife a classroom assistant in a special school. But he was reluctant. His school experience was a serious deterrent. He was happy with his life as it was, both at home and at work, so if ever college was suggested, he put it off. The traumatic change was his wife’s death from breast cancer. He loved his wife very much, so losing her was bad in itself. Added to that he became responsible for all the things she had always done, in particular looking after finances, home and family. He had left work because his employer would not allow him time off when his wife was ill, and family became the core of his life. He had two teenage children still at home, and daughter Clare (12 at the time of her mother’s death) was having serious problems at school both academically and socially. He held the family together when the kids were at home but struggled with housework, and was embarrassed by asking neighbours for help (especially after one old lady gave him a recipe book and he couldn’t read what she suggested). His life during the day was chaotic. He couldn’t get organised. He went to the shop half a dozen times for things he’d forgotten. He got in the car and drove to nowhere in particular. And he started drinking on his own. He realised that he had to stop when Clare came back home one morning having missed her bus, wanting to be taken to school by car and Tony had already had too much alcohol.

What finally sent Tony back to classes was a desperate need to help Clare as she struggled with her schoolwork. She’d been diagnosed as dyslexic before her mother became ill, but now all the responsibility fell on Tony.

with Liz dying and Clare’s [course work] coming up, er – Clare’s handwriting - if I can’t decipher it, nobody can decipher it. So I – the idea was to get a computer so she’d be able to do it and print it out. And so that’s when it started. And I thought, ‘well, what do you do?’ … So I went to Computers for the Terrified. And it worked.

This class served its purpose and he really enjoyed it, which encouraged him to sign up for more.

I got into it, I really enjoyed that, and then something came up - this is how I started back in the English, something came up about “after the third paragraph” and I thought,
“what’s a paragraph” you know… nothing like that ever stuck at school… so that’s why I started coming back to doing the English because I wanted to know…

This was less successful because Tony really needed a lot of individualised attention. His confidence in a classroom setting was fragile and easily overset. In this big classroom with people working on different subjects he felt uncomfortably as if he was back at school. He made some progress. For the first time he wrote a story of several pages.

I got carried away with that and sort of went into pages about it and to me it’s as though I’ve been locked away for years and somebody’s said “well here you go, here’s keys, you’re free now”.

But his enthusiasm was squashed because the teacher wouldn’t accept his poor spelling and writing.

if I had to write a letter for you now, I’d do it in sort of block capitals, and I’ve done it for years and years… but the tutor was saying “no you must use real writing” and I said “well if I did you would never read what I’ve written” and then it started getting to be the battle again. It was me being a kid again told “you must do this” and I don’t know if it’s a rebellious side of me… And I know it must have been two pages, full of this “trip to the dentist” …and then she threw it back at me because it weren’t in real writing… I’ve come asking for help and all of a sudden there’s the person with a big stick again.

He was developing a real enthusiasm for some formal learning, but, both at that early stage and even now, he was easily put off when it didn’t all go how he wanted it to, and immediately he felt as he did at his hated secondary school.

However he persevered because his sister-in-law recommended a different English class in a different community college. The new tutor, Joan, dealt with her students as individuals and did listen! She recognised that he was dyslexic like his daughter, and the relatively simple system of using coloured overlays led to a significant improvement in his reading, and a huge boost to his confidence. He is desperately keen to be able to read whole books for himself. Joan has also encouraged interests that he hadn’t previously followed up – particularly local history as it relates to his own life.

And through doing this history of Quarry Hill, the stuff that’s come out of me and the writing - I never knew it were there, you know, and for me to sit and write… and if I printed it out I think it’s like 47 sheets of A4 paper, that’s a hell of a lot of stuff that’s been stuck inside me that suddenly has come out. And I didn’t know it was there.

He loved his home and childhood in Quarry Hill flats, lived there until he got married in his mid 20s and was distressed when they were pulled down in the 1970s. With Janet’s encouragement he has spent many hours researching the history of the flats, writing up his own memories and fighting to resurrect the image of the flats – a flagship 1930s project which provided massively improved housing conditions for hundreds of people but which eventually developed the reputation as a sink estate – a description that Tony, as a resident cannot accept.

Over a few years Tony increased the number of classes he attended, studying English, computers and maths. The classes provided a structure for his previously chaotic days.
And they provided him with a personal interest, which stopped his self-destructive slide. They resulted in improved practical skills, new enthusiasms that carried beyond the classroom and a growth in confidence that allowed him to go to places he’d never previously have gone (library, theatre) and to take part in activities he’d never previously have considered (organising his daughter’s Girl’s Brigade Group).

Very recently he has cut back on the classes. He dropped maths when faced with an exam he believed he would fail. He felt as if he was being put in for the exam in order to show up his shortcomings, although he knew it wasn’t true. He left computing because of a patronising teacher, who didn’t help him when he needed it. The emotional after effects of his schooling slip in only too easily. But the English class and its direct spin off’s remain central to his life today.

Schooling triggered a lot of negative emotions for Tony. 30 years on, personal and family traumas sent him back to education, and education has since provided a major source of release and pleasure in his life.

More case studies

Tony is only one of the people I have worked with in this project. There are 10 more. In addition there are 10 cases that I know well because they come from the other Leeds researchers. Then there are about a hundred more respondents from the rest of the project. I don’t know all their stories so well but I can’t think of any where emotion hasn’t been in some way involved in their learning.

Of the people I have interviewed:

**Jim Hussar and Stephen Connor** are both retirees who have suffered depression, and went to the same classes at a community learning centre. Stephen initially became depressed as a result of work pressure. After treatment he moved to a basic unskilled job with no responsibility but suffered an accident which has stopped him working. He felt depression building up again but attending a series of classes at his local community learning centre has provided more than enough pleasure to offset the depression. What was important to both Stephen and Jim was not just learning about something that interested them but having teachers who have made the classes fun and become fully involved with their groups. And the groups themselves have gelled. Jim particularly valued studying in a mixed age group and felt that it helped the generations to understand one another. He believed strongly that the centre was acting as a focus, regenerating community spirit in the deprived community in which he lives. Both these men initially chose subjects of particular interest to them, but later added classes that were under-recruiting, often finding that they enjoyed these as much as their first choices. Thus Jim who never wrote anything loved the creative writing course and Stephen learned sign language and hopes to make use of it.

Unfortunately due to financial circumstances, the college that ran the courses decided to pull out of that community centre. This certainly provoked strong emotions from a diverse group of people, as they fought to keep the centre open, writing to MPs and counsellors, meeting college officials etc. They were partially successful as the council stepped in to provide a few courses. But there seems no longer to be sufficient centre of gravity – not sufficient variety of courses to attract sufficient students.
Jim who is 10 years older than Stephen, had a very basic schooling and although he enjoyed some of it there was never any opportunity for him to continue after the age of 14. Now he is totally committed to continuing with some courses. He says he does them for enjoyment and company, that exams and qualifications are irrelevant – but he did like receiving the first certificates of his life, and is now studying for GCSE maths which he sees as a challenge and wishes he could have done long ago.

Stephen who did night school courses during his apprenticeship, and upgrade courses for work, has also tried to continue with his current courses. But the computer course in a different centre with a different teacher seems to have completely lost its appeal and he is unlikely to continue.

**Anna Reynard** is in the same age group but comes from a totally different background, having done very well at school and gone on to university. She got her first degree at the age of 22, and did at PhD at 60. She loves learning and describes it as the “leitmotif of her life”. She was initially inspired to learn by her father who was himself disappointed at having to leave school and earn a living. She does feel she was pushed as a child to try to be the best at everything – dancing, acting, sports, and schoolwork. But she loved the learning and the success and didn’t resent it although she recognises now that she didn’t have much of a social life. This rebounded on her somewhat at university as complex romantic entanglements became too much for her. She dropped out after her second year, but with support from her parents and the university department returned a year later. She is quite categorical that up to that point she had been studying to do please others, even picking a subject that was convenient but not her favourite. However when she returned she was doing it for herself. Throughout her life and particularly in relation to formal classes both as a teacher and a learner she sees a series of themes with an emotional element to them which have, she feels, prevented her from achieving as much as she could have done.

She has always been torn between what others wanted of her and what she wanted for herself. She has always had a problem, recognised now, with her own high principles and an unwillingness to compromise, which sometimes meant not facing up to reality, and often resulted in distress. She came close to a breakdown more than once in her teaching career. But the total commitment to her social and political principles meant she kept trying. Nowadays she teaches and learns with U3A where teachers and students are all willing volunteers, but she still feels she gets too emotionally involved with the micropolitics of the classes. Nevertheless learning remains the emotional core of her life. “The day I stop learning is the day I die”.

**Gladys Dean**, in contrast, missed out on schooling almost completely as a child in the West Indies and came to Britain as a young wife completely unable to read or write. She has worked for a living for 40 years, successfully raised a family of 5 children and survived a husband who became abusive, but she has always been so ashamed of her inability to read and write that she wouldn’t do anything about it. Long after her husband’s death and her own retirement, one of her daughters put her name down for a literacy course locally. She agreed it was a good idea, but that didn’t make it any easier walking through the door on the first day and she nearly turned back. But once she got through the door she was able to relax as everyone was welcoming.
Joan and Margery’s [2 tutor’s] face, and just the face alone said I were going to be ok... I can’t read, and I’m so old. I mean I started... I was 62, somewhere there. And so I said, ‘everyone going to say, “Oh this big old lady can’t read and can’t do nothing”’. Put it like that. I can’t do nothing. I can cook and I can do that …oh yes, but I can’t read. I can’t write. And I go in and these 2 face, and another lad what were a student there, and he come over and said, ‘you’ll be ok’. You know, ‘you’ll be ok’... And I were alright from that, you know.

Like Tony, Jim and Stephen, she found that education became an important part of her life, late on. Her progress towards reading and writing has been slow but significant and her only problem is frustration at that slowness.

And little by little – now I can read a little. I’m really greedy to get it done quickly. I’m believe that I should can read that book, where I know by heart, ‘cept I can’t read it, but I just want it. Where you getting to know something better, so you just want to grab it.

She has signed up for other courses – needlework, cookery and maths – because she loves going to the classes. The maths is a bit of a struggle and she’s not sure if she can see the point. Her daily life arithmetic is more than adequate. Nevertheless:

[Life] were hard for me, you know. And it’s just since I’m go to college I talk plenty of things...I used to just keep everything in there…The best life I have is now…I really love going to school.

For the first time in her life she is doing something for herself – not for husband or family. And it is something she is enjoying. And that is quite apart from the practical benefits of greater independence and visibly growing confidence in herself.

Joe Pryce is another immigrant, now in his late 50s. He came over to join his parents at the age of 13, having had a good education whilst living with his grandmother in the West Indies. When he got here he was put straight into the bottom stream of a secondary modern school. It was an incredibly difficult time for him. He’d lost the grandmother he’d lived with all his life and been deprived of the decent education she had valued. In class he was being asked about jungles and cannibalism, and to keep classmates happy he started lying, telling stories about a non-existent jungle, thereby breaking one of his grandmother’s strongest tenets and believing he was condemning himself to hell. His parents wouldn’t help him because they accepted teachers’ decisions as unchallengeable. Through shame however he rapidly worked his way into the top stream of the school. He took external exams and was expected to do well. But his parents moved north and he never got his results. He obeyed his parents in the same way that they accepted what teachers said, but he was hugely resentful. It is only in the last few years, as he has been working with his own life and family history, that he has come to understand their point of view.

At his father’s behest Joe became an apprenticed craftsman and was proud to pass all his college exams. He became a successful self-employed businessman for a number of years until a failed investment led to a personal breakdown and a decision to change direction in his career. A course on a government re-employment scheme took him to a college where he ended up being recruited as a teacher of his own craft. This is what has brought him back to formal education. He first did the compulsory teacher training but found he enjoyed the experience of being back in the classroom as a learner so much that he has gone on to do a degree.
The last case I’m quoting here is **Wafa Jabeen**, younger than the others. Coming from a rather liberal Pakistani background, she did well at school and qualified as a teacher. She liked but doesn’t feel she fully appreciated education until her teaching degree. She really liked mixing with people of various ages and races and experience, and enjoyed the combination of practical and theoretical study. After a short time working in local primary schools she married a cousin and move to London with him. They enjoyed their time there as a young couple but when Wafa became pregnant they decided to move back to their families in the north. Wafa moved in with her in-laws and was completely shocked at their treatment of her. It seems they wanted to control her, her income and her baby, but she wasn’t willing! This was the non so formal learning experience of her life. As soon as they managed to buy their own house she moved out and has had minimal communication with her in-laws since. Her husband has every proof of what happened but while his brain believes it his heart doesn’t. Although she loved being a teacher Wafa has now settled into life as a traditional wife and homemaker with wider family responsibilities (on her side of the family). To maintain her own independence, and to keep her “brain alive” she had chosen to go to a series of courses mainly within her own community area. This included a university level course in Arabic. When that course ended she wanted to continue but decided she couldn’t go to one that involved travelling in the evening. She knew that her husband would go to his mother or sisters while she was out and she feared/knew they would drip feed him with suggestions as to what she might be doing. Paranoia or not, peace of mind was paramount. Fortunately she found another course more locally and in the daytime.

**Conclusion**

In all the work I have done on learning there has always been an emotional element, part of both its embodiment and embedding in context. Nevertheless this is the first paper where I have focussed on that element specifically. It is the first time I have focussed specifically on the emotional dimensions of learning in the case studies of the people I have worked with in the Learning Lives Project. And even though I’ve limited the range of the paper to formal learning the data nevertheless demonstrates a great range of emotions interacting in a great many different ways in these people’s formal learning. I’ve probably already used too many illustrative case studies, but there are many more I could have used. I hope that all the stories I have presented here demonstrate to you as well as they do to me that learning cannot be fully understood if emotions are ignored.

We’ve seen that emotions may be the trigger for starting engagement in formal education. They may be the reasons for pulling out. Along the way the individuals engagement affects their responses to the classes provided, and as a corollary the classes and the learning provoke emotions. I express these as if they were separate, as if one bit of emotion was completely separate from another and as if the emotion was separate from the person, from the actions and reactions and from the context. I hope from the stories that it is obvious that these are all interrelated in each person’s dispositions in each case study.

I hope that I have shown two themes in particular emerging from the case studies. Firstly that individual formal, classroom learning is embodied and embedded in practice and wider contexts, and that emotions are an important part of that embodiment which may precede and proceed from learning, and affect its progress.
Secondly a person’s emotional relationship with formal learning across their life course demonstrates significant elements of both consistency and change.

Currently, British Educational Policy seems to treat such views of learning as irrelevant. All the reasons that policy engages with for involvement in formal learning are instrumental. Individual’s reasons for becoming involved may be instrumental – to get a better job, or to cope with basic literacies - but they are equally likely to be serendipitous or to have an element of desire, escape, joy etc. Then, in the current policy context the outcomes of education always have to be measured. But the outcomes measured rarely include a measures of the joy (or despair) generated, or the depression lifted. These are things which are of very great significance in the lives of the people I have been talking about.

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It turns out that the expression of many emotions may be universal. Smiling is apparently a universal sign of friendliness and approval. Baring the teeth in a hostile way, as noted by Charles Darwin in the nineteenth century, may be a universal sign of anger. As the originator of the theory of evolution, Darwin believed that the universal recognition of facial expressions would have survival value.  

Most investigators concur that certain facial expressions suggest the same emotions in all people. Moreover, people in diverse cultures recognize the emotions manifested by the facial expressions. In classic research Paul Ekman took photographs of people exhibiting the emotions of anger, disgust, fear, happiness, and sadness. People’s everyday life seems profoundly emotional: participants experienced at least one emotion 90% of the time. The most frequent emotion was joy, followed by love and anxiety. People experienced positive emotions 2.5 times more often than negative emotions, but also experienced positive and negative emotions simultaneously relatively frequently. We also characterized the interconnections between people’s emotions using network analysis.  

Despite decades of research establishing the causes and consequences of emotions in the laboratory, we know surprisingly little about emotions in everyday life. We developed a smartphone application that monitored real-time emotions of an exceptionally large (N = 11,000+) and heterogeneous participants sample. Which emotions are easiest for you to tolerate? Our emotional state profoundly influences the quality of our lives. Unfortunately, many of us are not aware of how we’re feeling at any given moment or what the impact may be. Think about how you feel when you are at your worst. And how you feel when you are in control of your emotions. What adjectives come to mind?  

To control or regulate your emotions in any environment, you need to notice, monitor, recognize and adapt emotions optimally according to situations. Be ready to be vulnerable, as you take the first big first step in emotional wellness by paying attention to your sincere feelings. Naming your emotions tends to lessen the burden of being at your worst. It puts you in control.