

College Students' Perspectives on How Emotions Affect their Learning Motivation and Academic Performance

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Abstract

This study aimed to investigate types of emotional experiences that college students undergo, particularly those affecting learning motivation and academic performance. To this end, six college students residing in Seoul, South Korea participated in a series of 'focus-group interview (FGI)' sessions in which in-depths discussions took place. The researcher attempted to draw the participant students' opinions and ideas as they made interactions with each other. Three participants were placed in each of two groups, and each group had approximately 90-minutes-long sessions. The results showed that positive emotions, such as joy and enthusiasm, can increase learning motivation and academic achievement, while negative emotions such as anxiety and stress can hinder them. The findings also highlight that students actively employ coping strategies to manage negative emotions. Moreover, the study underscores students' desire for improved emotional support from instructors, indicating a gap between their expectations and the actual emotional care provided in educational settings. Relevant issues are discussed for future suggestions.

Keywords: College Students, Emotional States, Effects of Emotions, Stress, Joy, Learning Motivation

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Study

Emotions profoundly influence human cognitive processes in general, including perception, learning, attention, memory, and problem solving [1]. Emotional experiences are pervasive, and hold a crucial role within academic settings as emotions effectively influence nearly every aspect of human cognition. More specifically, emotions have a substantial impact on college students' learning motivation, decision-making processes, in-class engagement, relationships with others, and achievement level [2].

Emotional states college students experience can serve either as a catalyst for accomplishment, or become a major obstacle that hinders successful academic performance. For example, positive emotions including enthusiasm, curiosity, a sense of belongings, and a sense of achievement often act as a powerful motivator, driving students to engage more intensely with their coursework [3]. When students feel excited about a subject, they are more likely to invest time and effort in their studies, leading to increased comprehension and retention of knowledge. Conversely, negative emotions such as anxiety, boredom, or frustration can undermine their learning motivation, resulting in academic challenges that students need to overcome [4].

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From a wider perspective, emotional states within a higher education classroom setting can significantly impact a learner's motivation. A supportive and encouraging learning environment is likely to foster positive emotions and enhance learning motivation; on the other hand, a hostile or disengaged atmosphere can prompt negative emotions, demotivating students and impairing their academic performance [5].

Among probable factors, the present study focuses on how college students view their emotional states affect their learning motivation and academic performance. Its examination has potential to serve both maximizing learner engagement and improving learning process. Additionally, understanding the emotional influences on these two factors could help educators to provide learners with optimized learning environment and academic success. The results could even contribute to enhancing instructors' self-efficacy in teaching.

1.2 Research Questions

RQ 1. To what extent do college students feel their emotional states can affect their learning motivation?

RQ 2. To what extent do college students feel their emotional states can affect their academic performance?

RQ 3. What factors can affect their emotional states, from college students' perspectives?

2. METHODS

2.1 Selection of the Participants

This study implemented an approach named "focus-group interview" (FGI) in order to conduct a series of in-depth discussions among participant college students and to extract ideas and opinions occurred during the interactions. Six participant students were chosen for the study through a purposive sampling technique in order to organize a sense of sympathy among themselves. A more detailed description of the six student participants are described in Table 1.

Table 1. Background of the Participant Students

| Group | Participant | Gender | Year | Pursuing Degree | College | Major |
|---------|-------------|--------|----------------------------------|-----------------|------------------------------|---------------------------|
| Group 1 | Student 1 | Female | Senior | Bachelor's | Humanity and Social Sciences | Educational Psychology |
| | Student 2 | | Senior | Bachelor's | | Early Childhood Education |
| | Student 3 | | Junior | Bachelor's | | Educational Psychology |
| Group2 | Student 4 | | Junior | Bachelor's | Humanity and Social Sciences | Educational Psychology |
| | Student 5 | | 2 nd year in graduate | Master's | | Educational Psychology |
| | Student 6 | | 4 th year in graduate | Doctoral | | Educational Psychology |

2.2 Data Collection and Analysis

Two focus-group interview sessions were conducted for each group, and each session took approximately 90 minutes. For the interviews, an open-ended questionnaire tool that Kruger & Casey (2000) [6] suggested was implemented. It consists of four types of questions: imposing questions, introductory questions, major questions, and concluding questions, respectively. Its detailed items and contents are shown in the Appendix. After conducting a preliminary interview, the researcher refined the orders and contents of the questions prior to proceeding with the focus group interviews. A thorough analysis of these interviews was performed

using transcription data recorded during each session. Each student participant's verbal responses in Korean were translated into English for publication purpose. For more robust reliability and validity of the qualitative data analysis, a triangulation approach was employed; two research assistants with master's and doctoral degrees were chosen as student participants for the study in order to validate the accuracy of the discussion contents occurred during the interactions.

3. RESULTS

3.1 Student Participants' Perspectives on Positive and Negative Roles of Emotion

The student participants appear to be keenly aware of roles of both positive and negative emotions that seem to affect both their learning motivation and academic performance, mostly based on their own experiences, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Analysis on Student Participants' Perspectives on the Impact of Emotion

| Category | Statement | Participant |
|----------------------------|---|-------------|
| Roles of positive emotions | "For me, curiosity and interests [in the learning contents] work the best for learning motivation. When such curiosity sparks up, I often end up searching for more information voluntarily." | Student 3 |
| | "The feeling of achievement works as a great source of my learning motivation. More particularly, thinking about my success in the past somehow motivates me. It's like "because I was successful in the past, I can become successful in the future using the same methods." | Student 4 |
| | "For me, the order goes like this. Positive emotion arises, learning motivation sparks, the motivation maintains, and finally I get good grades. Such confidence is contagious, meaning I feel that I can success in other areas." | Student 2 |
| Roles of negative emotions | "Because there are other students showing greater achievement level than mine, I often feeling being left behind. That kind of negative feeling affects my learning motivation, and sometimes academic achievement." | Student 5 |
| | "When I was in high school, I regularly felt depressed because I barely had any friend. But, it helped me a lot to achieve good grades, because I was able to solely focus on the academic, without having to care about peer relationships." | Student 2 |
| | "Feeling stressed is not helpful in terms of studying. It only drags me down to the level where I feel that I am not a good student. In such cases, how my professors treat me can change my feeling." | Student 4 |

3.2 Student Participants' Strategies to Cope with Negative Emotions

The student participants shared their strategies as they cope with negative emotions that could possibly impede their learning motivation and academic achievement, as shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Analysis on Student Participants' Strategies to Cope with Negative Emotions

| Category | Statement | Participant |
|--|---|-------------|
| Acknowledgement one's own feelings | "Knowing what my feelings are helps me to find out where to start. For example, if I feel being left behind, I can start reviewing the course material. In the past not knowing | Student 2 |
| Successful memories in the past | "Balancing out the bad with the good is important. When negative emotions hinder my motivation, I try to remind myself about how I became successful in the academics before. It helps me overcome the harmful emotions." | Student 3 |
| Using negative emotions for success in the academics | "Not all negative emotions are bad, actually. I mean, for example, I often do not start working on my assignment until anxiety arises. Once I feel urged right before the deadline, the learning motivation level goes up the highest." | Student 6 |
| | "When I admit that being perfect is impossible, I realize that negative emotions bother me much less. A little bit of negative emotions could push me to achieve certain goals." | Student 3 |
| | "Having too much peace in my mind rather reduces my motivation for studying. When deadlines come close, I often feel anxious, and strangely enough, it somewhat helps me to get the work done." | Student 1 |

3.3 Student Participants Suggestions for Instructors regarding Emotional States

The student participants made a few suggestions for their instructors regarding emotional states. Their opinions are shown in Table 4.

Table 4. Analysis on What Student Participants Suggest for Instructors

| Category | Statement | Participant |
|-----------------------------|--|-------------|
| Suggestions for instructors | "I want them [the professors] to acknowledge that they can make big emotional impact to their students, both positive and negative. Immediate and specific feedback can encourage heighten students' motivation for learning, and verbal criticism can impede it. The effect of both cases can last for very long time." | Student 4 |
| | "Whenever I feel emotionally supported from my professors, it gives me hope and strength to overcome the large academic workload given to me. Sometimes, I feel that professors' attitude presents more influence than the workload itself." | Student 6 |
| | "Anxiety impedes my learning motivation, and it [anxiety] occurs when guidelines are vague. It'd be better if my professors provide more specific guidelines in terms of what they actually want from us for the assignments. That way, the anxiety will be tremendously reduced." | Student 2 |

| | |
|--|-----------|
| "Most of my professors give me respect as a student, as if I deserve it. When professors become mindful of my feelings, I often end up giving more respect to them, resulting in better grades." | Student 3 |
|--|-----------|

4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

4.1 Research Findings

The study attempted to investigate the relationships between positive and negative emotions of college students and the impact on their learning motivation as well as academic performance. The results appeared to provide insights regarding how students in colleges manage their emotional well-being while performing academic challenges.

First, the student participants were well aware of the significant impact of both positive and negative emotions on their learning motivation and academic performance. For example, positive emotions including joy, interests in learning, and enthusiasm hold power to increase their motivation, thereby improving their academic performance. This finding suggests that students agree that positive emotional and/or mental states can heighten the level of engagement in their learning activities. On the other hand, the student participants reported that negative emotions such anxiety, stress, isolation, boredom, and self-doubt could impede their learning motivation, resulting in damage to their academic performance.

Second, fortunately, it appeared that the students have strategies to cope with situations in which negative emotions impede their learning progress. Such adaptive capacity – presumably developed throughout their academic years – suggests that students are not passive recipients of emotional events, but rather proactively seek to mitigate them for more successful academic results. One notable response was that the students do not necessarily view negative emotion as a form of hinderance; rather, for example, a mild level of anxiety could lead them to increased preparation for examinations.

Third, the student participants expressed demand for better emotional supports from their college instructors, indicating a need for them to be more attentive to students' emotional states. This is mainly because the students' reported experience indicated a perceived gap between their expectations and the actual practice of emotional care that their instructors provide, meaning that the level of emotional supports students receive appeared to fall short of their needs. This implies that while students are aware of the importance of emotional well-being, there may be room for improvement in the implementation of emotional care practices by the instructors.

4.2 Limitations and Future Recommendation

The present study is subject to a few limitations. First, the inclusion of only six student participants may limit the generalizability of the findings to a broader population, meaning that the small sample size may not adequately represent the diversity of perspectives and experiences. Similarly, the study's participants were not drawn from diverse backgrounds, potentially proposing bias and limiting the applicability of the results to a more heterogeneous population. Second, the interview sessions were relatively short, lasting approximately 90-minutes-long each. A more extended period might have provided a more comprehensive insight into the impact of students' emotions on their learning motivation and academic performance. Third, while the study included a focus-group interview formats, it may not have extracted participants' deep experience and emotions. More extensive, in-depth interviews could have yielded richer qualitative data, offering a more detailed understanding of the phenomena under investigation.

Based on the prior body of researches, future studies are recommended to give due consideration to emotional factors and explicitly acknowledge their potential influences on college students' learning motivation and academic performance. By closely monitoring their emotional states and the factors that regulate them, one can yield scientifically established knowledge regarding emotional contributions to the academic-related components. This approach holds great promise in identifying emotional states that enhance learning performance and overall outcomes in educational environments.

Additionally, researchers interested in the field may conduct longitudinal studies to track changes in emotional states and its impact of students' learning motivation and academic performance over an extended

period of time. It can provide insights of how the cumulative effect of students' emotions could fluctuate throughout college years. Another recommendation is investigating intervention strategies. One can implement a series of interventions aimed at improving emotional regulation and management skills, resulting in better learning motivation and academic outcomes among college students.

4.3 Conclusion

The results of the present study revealed the remarkable impact of emotional states - whether positive or negative – of college students on their learning motivation and academic performance. Educational institutions are encouraged to emphasize the need for acknowledging emotional features in students' learning procedures. Students' demand for improved emotional support presents an opportunity for universities to establish a more nurturing and emotionally responsive learning environment. This research contributes to a deeper understanding of the intricate relationship between emotions and college students' academic aspects. Both educators and institutions need to recognize the significant role of emotions, and to work for creating learning environments designed to foster their joy, interests in learning, and enthusiasm. By doing so, administrators and educators in higher education could ultimately result in a more successful college experience among the learners.

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