

# Professors' Emotional Competencies and Learning in Education: An Exploratory Study in a Higher Institute in Tunisia

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**Abstract** – Emotions or soft strengths are attracting researchers' attention, they are perceived as skills that characterize the degree of individuals' professionalism and refer to both emotional intelligence and social or relational intelligence. We will focus on the role of emotions and emotional skills among university professors in the learning process. Our goal is to identify emotional skills among university professors and to build a learning model based on emotional intelligence. To achieve our goal, we conducted an exploratory analysis supported by an inductive methodology. Data collection was made through semi-structured interviews with 16 university professors belonging to a Higher Institute in Tunis. A thematic content analysis was mobilized and the results show that emotions are at the heart of the professors-students relationship, the emotional dimension influences professors' work emotions, beliefs, attitudes and motivation to teach. It is therefore appropriate to privilege emotional factors during the learning process. Our results also support the idea that emotional competencies such as self-management, relationship management and social know-how are fundamental qualities for a successful learning by teaching.

**Keywords** – Emotions, Emotional Intelligence, Emotional Competencies, Emotional Learning, Emergent Context.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Since these seminal work of Simon (1955) about the bounded rationality, several studies have focused on studying their implications, particularly on the decision-making process. In fact, recent literature focus on specific concepts such as intuition (Dane and Pratt, 2007), spirituality (Neck & Milliman, 1994; Emmons (2000) or emotions (Goleman, 2000; Salovey and Mayer, 1997) as results of the bounded rationality.

We aimed in this study to explore the emotional skills among university professors by advancing the following questions: How university professors' emotional skill scan affect learning by teaching? Indeed, we will question (1) whether the university professors consider their emotions during instruction (2) and whether emotionally intelligent professors can provide better learning than others? This research pursues three main research objectives: firstly, we focus on the relationship between affect, learning and organizational change, secondly, we analyze the relationship between emotions and leadership, and finally, we study emotional intelligence as a professional skill (Frémeaux and Noel, 2014).

Associating emotional intelligence and learning by teaching is of a particular interest for several reasons: First, few studies have focused on the study of affective dimensions, including emotional skills as a part of learning

by teaching in academia (Letor, 2011). Second, a new concept of learning should be adopted where the professor would be perceived as an expert of learning (Letor, 2011), a mediator, an emotionally competent person. Finally, the social effects of non-performing learning systems are now a days a focus for management researchers and educational science specialists "many of them considering that one of the objectives of a good teacher is to help pupils achieving their potential as learners and as individuals, which necessarily implies the recognition of the emotional dimension"(Arnold, 2006, p.1).

Our methodological design will be based on an inductive methodology. Data collection was made through semi-structured interviews with sixteen professors belonging to a Higher Institute in Tunis (ISCAE).

The structure of this research is as follows: First, we'll clarify the emotional intelligence concept by referring to the major theories related to. Second, we'll analyze the conceptual evolution and the transition from emotional skills to emotional learning. Third, we'll explain our methodology before discussing the results of our research and finally, we'll conclude.

## II. EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE: AN ACCURACY CONCEPT

According to Damasio (1995), emotions are likely to channel the cognitive process and the way of thinking, affect perceptions, choices, intentions, interpretations, motivations and behaviors. Several authors such as Chanouf and Rouan (2004) argue that individuals' behavioral destabilization can be caused by a loss in the emotional reaction ability.

Mayer, Dipaolo and Salovey (1990) argue that it is not the intelligence quotient that reflects a good indicator of people's performance at work, but rather emotional intelligence. They add that emotional intelligence refers to the individual's ability to understand and feel his or her emotions and emotions of others, and to regulate their emotions in order to live better and interact with their environment.

Salovey and Mayer (1997) define emotional intelligence as a type of social intelligence that involves the ability to understand their own emotions and others' ones and to distinguish between them. They also claim that the scope of emotional intelligence includes verbal and nonverbal assessment of emotional expression, regulation of ones and others emotions and the capacity to use emotional content in problem solving. Mayer *et al.*, (2001) confirm that

emotional intelligence is a sub set of social intelligence. They consider that emotionally intelligent persons have the ability to identify, understand and express their emotions, facilitating reflexivity, and allowing better adaptability in any situation.

According to Goleman and *al.*, (2002), emotional intelligence reflects person's ability to understand his own emotions (self awareness) and those of others. According to them, emotionally intelligent persons are able to regulate their moods and feelings and those of others. Hence, emotional intelligence is strongly related to leadership because it will permeate the relationship between a leader and his employees. "Being emotionally intelligent means being able to detect emotions and feelings of others in order to provide empathy" (Hahusseau, 2006, p.126).

Bar-on (1997) and Goleman (1995) suggest that emotional intelligence is not based only on pure intelligence linked to emotions but it includes other dimensions such as motivation, cognitive abilities, social skills and personality traits (Mayer and *al.*, 2001 ).

Emotional Intelligence "arouses passion and enthusiasm, and continuously nourishes the motivation and commitment of people" (Goleman et al., 2002, p.10). Research in the field of emotional intelligence continues to evolve along with the fields of study, models, definitions and measurement tests that are attached to. The concept of emotional intelligence becomes more complex and integrates new skills such as empathy, leadership and emotional learning. Indeed, emotional intelligence is conceived as a set of personal and interpersonal skills, which are emotional skills (Kotsou, 2012).

Emotions provoke a set of changes that affect the cognitive abilities of the person, his ability to think and reason, generates psychophysiological reactions such as facial expressions and palpitations, emotion is also responsible for individual motivational factors, positive or negative emotion affects the well-being of the person, thus manipulating person's feelings towards others.

Our theoretical framework relies on the multiple intelligence theory of Gardner (1997). We choose to focus on two types of intelligences that are interpersonal and intrapersonal intelligences. The intra personal intelligence depends on better identification of our own emotions; this ability allows persons to better understand their motivations, strengths and weaknesses. The interpersonal intelligence is the ability of a person to identify others' emotions and to temper their moods and arouse their motivations. These qualities are important in the work place; they reflect human sociability, benevolence, cooperation and initiatives for sharing.

Petrides and Furnham (2007) consider emotional intelligence as a personality trait dimension because every person is different from others by his ability to detect, treat, and identify affective information. This model contains five aspects of emotional intelligence gathered in four categories which are welfare, self-control, emotionality and sociability.

### III. FROM EMOTIONAL SKILLS TO EMOTIONAL LEARNING

According to Goleman et *al.*, (2002), emotional intelligence can't constitute in itself a liable predictor of job performance, we should replace it by emotional competencies that reflect individuals' performance in the workplace.

Emotional competencies are mainly emotional and interpersonal skills required for the practice of teaching "knowing each other, knowing how to manage students' emotions, understanding those of others, are part of the necessary skills in the teacher's profession" (Gendron, 2008, p.7).

#### *Knowing How to Identify Emotions*

It consists in recognizing own emotions and discerning others' ones, it refers to a personal and interpersonal emotional aptitude. This skill is based primarily on the person's ability to code emotional information and detect non-verbal messages. Emotions are valuable informants for emotionally competent people "people who are aware of their emotions and those of others have access to important information about their functioning and that of their environment" (Kotsou, 2012, p.54).

#### *Knowing How to Express Emotions*

This skill is conceived as the second power of emotional skills, it is conceived as a double personal and interpersonal skill. The ability to express emotions has a great influence on the relationships between individuals "one can say that one masters this competence when one is able to express one's emotions in a pertinent way according to the context and its Objectives and that we can facilitate the expression of the emotions of its interlocutors" (Kotsou, 2012, p.59).

Knowing how to express one's emotions is a fundamental quality that guides the relationships between individuals and this quality seems relevant to the teaching process. Expressing your emotions in a productive way is a revealing skill for professionalism "You learn how your rational skills work together with your emotional skills, increasing your ability to interact with others: parental life, couple life, work, play, Teaching and love" (Steiner, 2011, p.24).

Because teaching is a relational job, knowing how to combine rationality and affectivity in a homogeneous way and how to express one's emotions is an inevitable finality. The professor faces a great challenge to adapt to the demands of the academic community. Indeed, a healthy and fluid expression of emotions is a central emotional competence, requiring learning, but offering positive results at the personal and relational level.

#### *Understanding Emotions*

It is the ability to assimilate one's emotional suffering to those of other people, this refers to the ability to decipher emotional messages and thus to understand the intentions of others, to have an emotional understanding "that means being able to relate the emotion felt with that which favored its triggering. It also means being able to identify the potential messages conveyed by this emotion" (Kotsou, 2012, p.63).

*Knowing How to Regulate Emotions*

It is the fourth emotional skill, reflecting a powerful indicator of professional, personal and social performance "emotions are an integral part of human nature. Recognizing and managing them, listening to others productively means strengthening rather than diminishing our personal power "(Steiner, 2011, p.24). Fermaux et Noel (2014) add that emotions allow individuals to moderate their behaviors in order to harmonize with their environments, they awaken in people a sensitivity of what happens around them, so they help to decide effectively. These authors emphasize the relationship between positive emotions and inventiveness, and they add that the manifestation of positive emotions positively affects attitudes in others. Mayer et al (2001) the emotionally intelligent person has the ability to experience positive emotions and minimize negative emotions. Cusin and Ducros (2015) add that innovation, involvement and interactivity in the workplace reduce negative emotions summarized in Table 1 Emotional skills are then the result of developing emotional regulation. Beyond a resistance, these skills result through the practice of a leadership whose pedagogy, ethics, accompaniment and encouragement. Emotional skills are intimately linked to the emotional dimension and promote social relationships. Ignoring emerging emotions in a situation means neglecting valuable messages that help in understanding a situation and then making appropriate choices to ensure that they fit into action.

Table 1: Emotional intelligence, applied to the context of pedagogical practices

Dimensions of Emotional Intelligence	Application (in pedagogical practices)
Emotional information processing	His own emotions
Production of emotional knowledge	The emotions of the students.
Adaptation to pedagogical situations	The Climate of the Classroom
Attitudes and behavior Resultants	The formation of the student's emotional intelligence.

Source: Letor (2011, p.10)

Education is a job based on communication. For some, these are weaknesses, for others, they are a strength in themselves if we learn to better understand them and manage them, hence to know how to manage their emotions. Emotions, self-regulation, control of impulses are vital skills in the lives of people, especially university professors. According to Gendron et al., (2002), these competencies intervene in the regulation of the working climate, the improvement of citizenship through exemplarity, the development of the efficiency of education, promote the flourishing of work at work. They add that when the leader effectively adopts his emotional intelligence, the people with whom he works feel safe, comfortable, interact effectively, are motivated, have a sense of sharing and collective learning, and are endowed with Good professional performance.

Teaching is a profession that interacts intellectually, emotionally, ethically on the part of the teacher

and the student. According to Maroy (2006) a class manager in a context of change, represents a major challenge for teachers. He adds that the changes that accompany the teaching profession require the teacher to put his skills into practice in order to properly carry out the learning process and create an atmosphere favorable to learning. Teaching is far from passing orders, a competent teacher is the one who succeeds the leadership of the class.

In teaching, leadership is not an influence, but it is a practice of leading a constitution. The quality of teacher leadership is highly valued in the coaching process. "In order to provide leadership to students, the teacher should provide sufficiently credible and consistent support for the group to feel secure , Framed and that the students who compose it do not feel threatened in their integrity "(Gendron and Lafotune, 2009, p.127).

According to Gendron (2008), recent literature in the field of "leadership" in teaching includes the teacher portal on their colleagues as a discipline coordinator that affects their leadership quality in class , The teacher's leadership, does not depend on specific personality traits, but rather on the mobilized skills applied to successful learning. Indeed, the style of leadership applied in the learning process is a subject of study in itself.

According to Chanlat (2003), the fundamental cause of the remarkable growth of the place of the emotions in the recent studies is the rarefaction or absence of the rational man. For Damasio (1995), emotion is not an irrational activity; on the contrary, it works intimately with reason. Emotional capital is defined by Gendron (2008) as a harmony of emotional skills, it is an asset for the well-being and professional efficiency, and contributes to social cohesion. Emotional competencies are then the result of emotional regulation development.

Our conceptual model will be presented as follows:

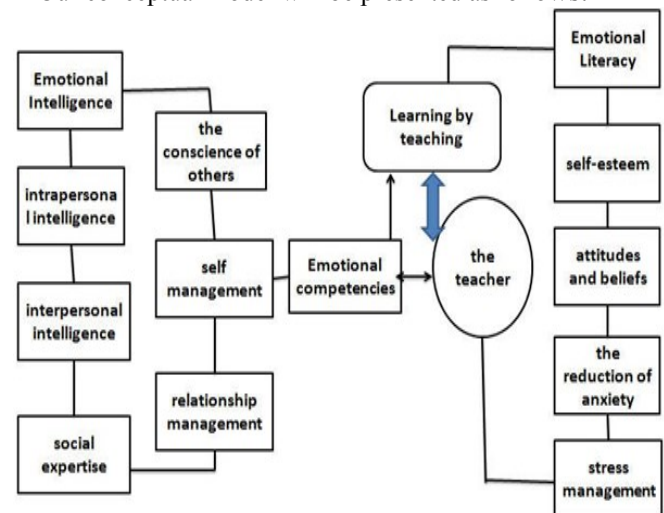


Fig. 1. The emotional factors affecting learning

**IV. METHODOLOGY**

The methodology is qualitative pursuing an exploratory objective. To attain this goal, we adopt an inductive reasoning. Indeed induction is recommended to better



understand the "social process" behind a under-studied phenomenon (Miles & Huberman, 1991, p.31).

The semi - structured interview is appropriate for this type of study because it would "let the interviewee speak as freely as possible while incorporating significant points that could bring out the meanings associated with this accommodation and its context" (Blanchet and Gotman, 2007, p.7).

We conducted an exploratory study based on a sample that consists of 15 professors belonging to different levels in the hierarchy (1 temporary, 4 assistants, 9 assistant professors, 1 associate professor), working in the Higher Institute of Accounting and Business Administration. The interviewed professors are predominantly women (9 women and 7 men).

The interviews were conducted between April 17<sup>th</sup> and May 4<sup>th</sup>, 2015 in the staff room or in the classroom after obtaining professors' agreement. These interviews lasted on average 25 minutes. We didn't use recorders but noted all responses taking care to manually decrypt the gestural, the grimaces and every manifestation of the emotional state.

## V. RESULTS AND CONCLUSION

The majority of interviewed professors pay great attention to their students' emotions and they put great emphasis on the importance of emotions during instruction for success full earning.

Affectivity in the learning process makes the student-professor relationship more confident, keeps an emotionally positive learning climate. Indeed, emotions stimulate in students a sense of belonging and integration.

Communicative competence is an attitude encouraging professors to understand and learn about how to manage students' emotions, mainly in time of crisis. Collaborative work stimulates communication, making learning more interesting and promotes the exchange and interactivity, which also improves there tentation of information. Dialogue and discussion allow professors to check whether the learners have understood the course or not.

The self esteem allows students to learn better and achieve their goals. The professor's ability to increase students' self-esteem helps them go over anxiety states and motivate them for learning. Culture and life skills contribute also to increase students' self-esteem, reduce anxiety and promote energy and willingness to learn. Changing the learning style, varying manners and ways of explaining improve the learning quality by making learning more interesting and also get rid of boredom. Participatory in class is a method that stimulates students' motivation for learning. The collaborative and integrative pedagogy allow also successful learning. The relaxed atmosphere is a favorable condition for the collaborative and participatory learning.

Kindness, energy and the teacher's flexibility allow professors establishing a trusting and respectful relational database with the students. The emotional climate is seen as an essential condition for learning. Motivation and

encouragement are used to create an emotionally positive learning climate. Professors who made an effort to reassure their students to keep a good atmosphere in the classroom and to avoid stresss imulators during training ensures its course with a reduced level of absenteeism.

This exploratory study identifies emotional skills among professors and reveals the appropriate learning style that suits these skills. Following this study, we were able to identify the following emotional skills: emotional intelligence (emotional awareness, empathy, understanding emotions, emotional regulation, emotional literacy, and the correct interpretation of the emotional information), Intrapersonal intelligence, interpersonal intelligence, social skills and awareness of others the self-management and relationship management.

After identifying emotional skills among professors, we proceeded to the second stage of studying which is the relationship between these skills and learning. The more the professor is emotionally competent, the more he is aware of his own emotions, is more empathetic towards his students. Moreover, he effectively interprets the emotional nature of information, he can regulate his emotions, he masters unpleasant situations and he has a good relationship with his students. Thus, a new approach of learning process appears, based on emotional skills. The professor is responsible for supporting learners by making this process more flexible and accessible through dynamic teaching practices based on exchange and interactivity.

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