

**Exploring the Role of Positive Emotions in Leadership Learning**

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### Introduction/Need for Research

Research regarding the influence of emotions on learning demonstrates a strong relationship between positive emotions and learning (Fredrickson, 1998; Pekrun, et al., 2002; Rowe, et al., 2015; Schmidt, 2020; Vail, 1994). Specifically, positive emotions of joy and interest have been shown to enhance students' memory and concentration and supported students' interpersonal communication (Rowe et al., 2015). Researchers have also found correlations between positive emotions and academic task performance and achievement (Pekrun et al., 2002). However, previous studies have yet to explore how students connect emotions to their experience and learning process within the context of a postsecondary leadership course.

Classroom instruction and social environments influence students' academic emotions related to their perceptions of control and value in a classroom environment (Pekrun et al., 2002). Active learning through simulations, role-play, problem-based learning, other experiential learning activities, and psychologically safe classrooms positively contribute to learning and retention (Wolfe, 2006). Leadership educators frequently employ these collaborative and experiential learning strategies along with creating supportive and psychologically safe learning communities in leadership courses (Guthrie & Jenkins, 2018; Jenkins, 2020). In this study, we address the gap in leadership education literature regarding how leadership courses unlock students' learning and development by exploring the role of positive emotions in fostering leadership learning. Two research questions guided our inquiry: 1) *Do students experience positive emotions throughout their engagement in a postsecondary leadership course?* and 2) *In what ways do students attribute positive emotions to their experience in a leadership course?*

### Theoretical Framework

We utilized Fredrickson's (1998) broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions as a lens to explore how students in a postsecondary leadership class connect the emotions they felt during class to their leadership learning. Positive emotions are "brief, multisystem responses to some change in the way people interpret-or appraise-their current circumstance" (Fredrickson, 2013, p. 3). Fredrickson's (2013) work identifies ten key positive emotions: joy, gratitude, serenity, interest, hope, pride, amusement, inspiration, awe, and love. The broaden-and-build theory postulates that experiencing positive emotions sparks current and future effects and results in enhanced well-being or flourishing. Positive emotions broaden one's thought-action repertoire in the moment, which may ignite novel ideas, boost creative thinking, and spark generosity, among other reactions. Positive emotions also build durable social, emotional, intellectual, and psychological resources that can be drawn upon and put to use in the future (Fredrickson, 2013).

### Methods

All data was collected at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign from the Fall 2020 semester to the Spring 2022 semester. Students enrolled in leadership courses during these terms were invited to complete a questionnaire at the end of each academic semester within each course. The questionnaire included two open-ended items, "Think about how you FELT when you participated in this leadership course. What emotions come to mind?" and "How did these emotions affect your learning about leadership?" Two members of the research team began by using Fredrickson's (2013) ten representative positive emotions as provisional codes to analyze student responses to the two open-response survey items listed above (Saldaña, 2009). We then

engaged in a series of initial and focused coding cycles to build an understanding of how reported positive emotions contributed to student leadership learning (Saldaña, 2009; Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

### Findings

Of the 309 participants, 244 identified their primary emotion as positive, of which 225 were coded into Fredrickson's (2013) ten representative positive emotions. The most salient emotions were interest ( $f = 75$ ), joy ( $f = 49$ ), serenity ( $f = 48$ ), and pride ( $f = 35$ ). Participants attributed the positive emotions to their leadership learning in multiple and unique ways. However, three salient ideas consistently appeared which resulted in the construction of three respective themes. Theme one was *Gateway to Engagement*. Students attributed positive emotions to motivation to attend class, pay attention, and engage in the learning process. Feeling interested, happy, calm, hopeful, and amused created a desire to show up every day, eager for a new, joyful, and interesting learning experience. Experiences of joy, serenity, and hope prompted students to be more comfortable participating during class. Students also connected feelings of serenity to an increased willingness and ability to express their thoughts freely during class discussions. This was attributed to a comfortable and positive atmosphere, feeling cared for and seen, and feeling like peers and instructors valued their opinions. Theme two was *Deepening Desire to Learn*. Experiencing emotions of joy, interest, inspiration, serenity, and pride instilled a desire and drive to learn leadership concepts. Students used words like "curious", "intrigued", "confident", and "happy", among others, to capture how these emotions motivated them to understand the material taught in class, work harder on coursework, and become "eager to learn more" (interest). Theme three was *Motivation for Application*. Emotions of awe, interest, joy, pride, and inspiration allowed students to think beyond their engagement in their leadership course and begin to consider how they can use their new learning in their own lives. These emotions motivated students to change their behavior, consider future leadership opportunities, and apply their learning in numerous and diverse ways. Students felt excited, invigorated, open-minded, confident, and contemplative and these emotions sparked a desire to apply the content "within and outside of this course" (pride), make changes in their lives, and become the best leader they can be.

### Conclusions/Implications/Recommendations

This study provides insight into how positive emotions might impact the learning experience of students in a leadership course. We saw how multiple emotions motivate students to show up, pay attention, participate, engage, and feel agentic in expressing their thoughts and opinions with their peers and instructors. To gain a clearer and more descriptive understanding of student emotions, we recommend future studies measure student emotions multiple times throughout the learning experience and utilize validated and reliable instruments like the modified Differential Emotions Scale (mDES) (Fredrickson et al., 2003). Finally, this study did not seek to connect thought-action repertoires to pedagogical strategies in a leadership education classroom. Future work that assesses pedagogical or other course-related phenomena (e.g., interactions with peers, faculty, the curriculum, etc.) and the more long-term durable resources it helps build will offer a more nuanced understanding of the role positive emotions play in learning leadership. However, this study opens the door for future work that acknowledge the power and importance of positive emotions in the leadership learning experience.

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