Reconceptualising emotions-as-practices in education: A practice-oriented approach

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Abstract

Emotions play a pivotal role in shaping educational experiences, yet their subjective and transient nature presents considerable challenges for research. This conceptual paper seeks to address these challenges by employing the Theory of Practice Architectures (TPA) as a lens to explore emotions as socially distributed and constructed phenomena within educational settings. TPA's holistic lens of 'sayings', 'doings', and 'relatings' offers a novel multi-dimensional approach to investigate emotions-as-practices.

In education contexts, including the evolving landscape of Networked Learning, emotions significantly influence learners' motivation, engagement, and achievement. Beyond individual impact, they contribute to the collective atmosphere of educational institutions, affecting classroom dynamics, inclusivity, and collaboration. However, research methods often struggle with capturing the complexity and fluidity of emotions, which creates a need for a revised methodology.

This paper, underpinned by Scheer's work on emotional practices and Wilkinson's theorisation of emotions in practice, argues for a reconceptualisation of emotions. It presents them as distributed and entangled actions, discourses, and relationships rather than merely individualised physiological responses. In Networked Learning, the interplay of emotions and learning is emphasised by digital architectures, creating unique emotional experiences and challenges. The rise of affectivism in social sciences calls for a deeper understanding of these experiences, as digital spaces alter the ways emotions are expressed, perceived, and performed.

Utilising TPA, this paper conceptualises emotions-as-practices and highlights the importance of researching them through the tangible anchors of 'doings', 'sayings', and 'relatings'. This approach transcends the individualistic perspective and enables researchers to illuminate the collective nature of emotions-as-practices within education. In the context of Networked Learning, this conceptualisation reveals how digital learning can shape and is shaped by the emotional landscape through actions, discourse, and relational dynamics, and thus provides insights in the practice-oriented research on emotions.

By focusing on emotions-as-practices, the paper advances a nuanced view to investigate the holistic experiences of emotion that are sensitive to the active, discursive, and relational aspects. This perspective pushes the boundaries of emotion research, and suggests novel pathways for Networked Learning. The TPA serves as a valuable lens for researchers, educators, and policy makers to understand and integrate emotions-as-practices in the wider networks of educational practices. As educational paradigms evolve with advances in technology and artificial intelligence, the need to recognise and support emotions in education becomes increasingly critical, ensuring they are not only felt but actively fostered and integrated in learning environments.

Keywords

Emotions-as-practices, affective practices, Theory of Practice Architectures, Networked Learning, education.

Why do emotions and emotional practices matter in education?

Emotions, while seemingly intangible and subjective, exert significant influence on the learning experiences of individuals (Fredrickson, 2013; Martin & Reigeluth, 2013; Zeivots, 2016). Emotions are more than fleeting individualistic feelings; they are deeply entwined with the cognitive, social and physical aspects of education, influencing not just learning outcomes but also the broader educational environment (Wilkinson, 2021). Their centrality to the learning process is evident in the way emotions shape students' motivation, engagement and overall academic achievement (Walker et al., 2010; D'Errico et al., 2016). Emotions can drive a student to persevere through challenges (Järvenoja et al., 2019) and can also act as barriers, causing disengagement or withdrawal from the learning process (Balwant, 2018).

Beyond the individual, emotions play a pivotal role in shaping the broader educational milieu. They influence classroom dynamics, interactions between peers, and the relationships between educators and learners (Wilkinson,

2021). The collective emotional atmosphere of an educational institution can set the tone for its inclusivity, supportiveness and overall productivity (Michels et al., 2020). A supportive and so-called positive emotional environment can foster collaboration, creativity and student achievement (You, 2021). In contrast, a perception of negative emotional atmosphere can lead to disengagement, conflict and reduced academic outcomes (Kahu & Nelson, 2018; Michels et al., 2020).

As central as emotions are to education, researching them presents a plethora of challenges (Zembylas, 2007). One of the primary challenges is their inherent subjectivity (Planalp, 1999). Unlike quantifiable academic results or observable behaviours, emotions can be deeply personal, varying widely among individuals even in similar educational contexts. Furthermore, they change from moment to moment, influenced by a myriad of internal and external factors (Knoblauch, 2017). This fluidity makes them particularly hard to pin down and study holistically. Moreover, the complex interplay between emotions, cognition, and behaviour makes it challenging to isolate emotions and study them in isolation (NLEC et al., 2021). Traditional research methodologies, often grounded in objectivity and the collection of quantifiable data, find it challenging to capture the nuanced, multifaceted nature of emotions. The dynamic and complex nature of emotions, which can evolve based on internal reflections and external interactions, further complicates this inquiry (NLEC et al., 2021).

Yet, despite these challenges, the significance of emotions in education cannot be understated. The rise of holistic education paradigms underscores the need to consider the emotional wellbeing of learners alongside their academic achievements. Emotions are not peripheral to education; they are central to it, influencing every aspect from individual learning experiences "signifying what matters to people" (Weenink & Spaargaren, 2016, p. 66) to the broader educational environment (Scheer, 2012). Their impact on motivation, engagement and overall learning outcomes makes them a critical area of study in educational research (Walker et al., 2010; D'Errico et al., 2016).

This conceptual paper is underpinned by Scheer's (2012) work on *emotional practices* and Wilkinson's (2021) conceptualising on *emotions in practice* as well as ontological influences of the Theory of Practice Architectures (TPA) (Kemmis, 2022) and Networked Learning (NLEC et al., 2021). This paper is a work-in-progress conceptualisation about researching emotional practices as socially distributed phenomena. More specifically, the paper aims to explore groundings behind studying emotions-as-practices through 'doings', 'sayings' and 'relatings' which are intertwined and contribute to practice emergence (Kemmis, 2022).

Emotions and affect in Networked Learning

Networked Learning is an evolving field within educational research that harnesses the digital transformation to foster connections among learners, educators, technologies and digital resources. As with any learning environment, emotions play a pivotal role in shaping the experiences within Networked Learning. What makes emotions in Networked Learning particularly intriguing is their entanglement with the unique characteristics of digital spaces, amplifying both opportunities and challenges in these hybrid relationships (Markauskaite et al., 2022; Fawns, 2022).

Emotions in Networked Learning can be seen as both a response to and a driver of learning experiences. The digital architecture of Networked Learning allows for diverse connections, giving rise to emotional experiences that are timed, historical and entangled in constantly changing networks (Zembylas, 2023). For instance, the sense of belonging, while deemed significant in educational settings, gets increasingly complex in digital spaces (Lim et al., 2023). Learners might find communities that resonate with their interests, leading to a heightened sense of belonging (Wong, 2023). In contrast, the vastness of being connected with digital spaces can also cause feelings of isolation and information overload, which can be overwhelming and influence learning experience (NLEC et al., 2021).

Moreover, the asynchronous nature of many Networked Learning environments allows for reflection, potentially intensifying certain emotional experiences. The delay between interactions, while providing time to process and reflect, can also amplify feelings of anxiety or anticipation. The often depersonalised nature of digital communication may lack non-verbal cues and can lead to misinterpretation, triggering unintended emotional responses (Zembylas, 2023).

The study of affect has rapidly gained prominence in the wake of the 'affective turn' (Zembylas, 2016) and 'rise of affectivism' in social sciences (Dukes et al., 2021). Affect, closely related to but distinct from emotions, is a crucial dimension in Networked Learning. In this field affect is linked to experiential tendencies that flow through the digital spaces, influencing moods and atmospheres, and can be seen as the digital 'ambiences', 'atmospheres', and 'vibes' or that set the tone for interactions and learning (Michels et al., 2020). They can be shaped by design elements, platform choices or group dynamics, influencing learners' engagement and perceptions (NLEC et al., 2021). For instance, the design aesthetics and user interface of a learning management system can evoke certain

affect and influence learners' motivation levels (Ejsing-Duun & Pischetola, 2023). Similarly, group dynamics in online forums or communities can generate collective moods, which in turn can affect individual emotional experiences (Zeivots & Shalavin, 2024).

When seeking methods to study emotions-as-practices in education, I approach emotions as socially distributed and constructed phenomena, which actively shape and are shaped through practices. I employ the terms 'emotions', 'affect', and 'feelings' interchangeably. In doing so, I highlight ontological roots in post-humanistic tradition and illuminate challenges of distinctly defining these terms without overlooking the grey areas that exist between them (Griffiths, 1995). Importantly, our understanding and experience of 'emotions' are deeply rooted in varying trajectories that arise from broader sociocultural and ontological views and distinct theoretical lines of inquiry (Wilkinson, 2021). The fluid, distributed and elusive practice of emotions, combined with emergence from constantly changing social, cultural and historical contexts, suggests they are not conducive to specific categorisation (Lupton, 1998). For example, in Networked Learning, the interplay of emotions and affect offers rich insights in how digital spaces are experienced. As Ahmed states:

> While you can separate an affective response from an emotion that is attributed as such (the bodily sensations from the feeling of being afraid), this does not mean that in practice, or in everyday life, they are separate. In fact, they are contiguous; they slide into each other; they stick, and cohere, even when they are separated. (Ahmed, 2010, p. 231)

This intertwined nature becomes pronounced in Networked Learning, where the boundaries between personal and collective, local and global, and even synchronous and asynchronous, are constantly negotiated. Emotions are deeply interpersonal, emerging and evolving within the matrix of social relationships. The relationships among people, between people and technologies and so on have become arenas for research on emotions-as-practices. For example, the increasing amount of co-design projects in education (e.g. Örnekoğlu-Selçuk et al., 2023; Zeivots et al., 2023; Wardak et al., 2024) which approach teaching and learning experiences as a highly collaborative effort requires methodology that assists in capturing practices as not only individual, social or material, but deeply entangled (Fawns, 2022). As Networked Learning continues to evolve, so will the emotions-as-practices within it, which necessitates continuous exploration and adaptation of methods that help to illuminate these complex dimensions.

Researching emotions-as-practices through Theory of Practice Architectures

The Theory of Practice Architectures (TPA) provides a practice-oriented lens for examining emotions within educational research, emphasising the intricate ways in which emotions are woven into the fabric of educational practices. This approach, grounded in the work of Kemmis (2022) and Wilkinson (2021), reconceptualises emotions as networked phenomena which are experienced, distributed and negotiated in specific sites. By integrating the intertwined dimensions of 'doings', 'sayings', and 'relatings' (Kemmis, 2022), TPA allows for a comprehensive exploration of emotions-as-practices.

The necessity to distinguish emotions-as-practices from emotional practices comes from an assumption that most practices carry with them certain emotional and affective tones (Weenink & Spaargaren, 2016). However, TPA typically views emotional experiences as an aspect of relatings, not doings and sayings. While emotions both shape and are shaped by all practices, I argue for the scope of this paper to consider emotions-*as-practices* in and of themselves. In doing so, TPA offers a methodology to investigate emotions not solely through relatings, but all three: doings, sayings, and relatings. For instance, expressing anger, showing empathy, or celebrating joy can be investigated through actions (what is being done?), communication (what is being said?) and relationships (who/what is interacting?). They are manifestations of emotions in action. These emotional actions are infused with cultural norms, societal expectations, and are influenced by the surrounding material arrangements (Boler, 1999).

This approach to emotions-as-practices aligns with Scheer's (2012) and Wilkinson's (2021) conceptualisations that encompass actions, discourses, and relationships that collectively shape emotions. They argue that emotions are constructed, communicated, and manifested in specific contexts. In the context of education, TPA's holistic lens of 'sayings', 'doings', and 'relatings' allows to capture the social, material, and discursive dimensions of emotions. For example, celebrating educational achievements reflect emotions in action that are influenced by cultural norms, societal expectations and educational outcomes.

In doings, TPA emphasises the observable actions and expressions of emotions within educational contexts. Kemmis (2022) articulates this as the material-economic dimension of practices, where actions such as comforting gestures by educators or creating a safe space for groupwork are not merely expressions of internal feelings but crucial in shaping the emotional culture of educational settings. These actions demonstrate how emotions, as practices, play a pivotal role in the tangible, everyday experiences of education.

The sayings aspect of TPA focuses on the discursive construction of emotions. This dimension involves how emotions are talked about, labelled, and discussed within learning environment. Wilkinson (2021) highlights the importance of language and discourse in shaping emotional experiences and norms. The narratives constructed around emotions, the emotional vocabulary used by educators, students or learning management systems, and the discussions that ensue contribute to the cultural-discursive construction of emotions. This reflects the ways in which emotions are embedded in the narratives and discourses of educational settings, influencing and being influenced by the wider emotional norms and expectations.

Relatings explore the relational dynamics through which emotions are experienced, negotiated, and shaped. Emotions are deeply relational, emerging from the interactions among students, educators, and within the broader institutional structures. This dimension underscores the social-political arrangements of practices, where emotions are embedded in the collective atmosphere and dynamics of educational settings. This conceptualisation aligns with multiple educational contexts, including Freirean pedagogy and Networked Learning, that seek to 'involve processes of collaborative, co-operative and collective inquiry, knowledge-creation and knowledgeable action, underpinned by trusting relationships, motivated by a sense of shared challenge and enabled by convivial technologies' (NLEC, 2021, p. 319). The relationships and interactions within these settings are sites where emotions are negotiated, amplified, or suppressed, reflecting the complex interplay between individual and collective emotional experiences (Scheer, 2012).

In the Networked Learning, the practice-oriented nature of emotions becomes even more pronounced. The digital spaces of learning present unique opportunities and challenges for the expression, perception, and experience of emotions (Ifenthaler et al., 2023; Kuhn et al., 2023; Markauskaite et al., 2022). The asynchronous nature of digital communication, the design of online platforms, and the dynamics of virtual collaborations highlight the significance of researching emotions through the lenses of doings, sayings, and relatings. This approach captures the distributed nature of emotions in digital learning environments, offering insights into the ways digital spaces shape and are shaped by emotional practices.

By employing TPA to study emotions-as-practices, this conceptual paper transcends traditional views of emotions, highlighting their active, discursive, and relational dimensions within educational sites. This exploration underscores the complexity and multifaceted nature of emotions as entangled in the doings, sayings, and relatings, offering a nuanced way to investigate the holistic experience of emotions in education. Through this lens, emotions are recognised for their impact on individual learning experiences and for their integral role in shaping the collective and distributed emotional landscape of educational environments.

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