

## **Emotional highs in adult experiential learning**

Sandris Zeivots

University of Technology Sydney

---

*Despite knowing that positive emotional experiences tend to be beneficial for adult learning, our incomplete understanding of the emotional system rarely allows us to incorporate emotion adequately in real learning situations. The experience of emotional highs, as observed in adult experiential learning courses, has been selected as the phenomenon of the study. This paper is concerned with developing a more sophisticated understanding of the phenomenon by studying the lived experience of emotional highs. Hermeneutic phenomenology has been selected as a suitable approach. This approach examines the lived state of emotional highs as well as recognises how adult learners make sense of these experiences. The lived experiences of 15 Australian adult learners were examined. Learners participated in one of three 4–8 day adult experiential learning courses, including two Outward Bound courses. The courses were held half indoors and half outdoors. Learners reflected and made sense of their lived experience through surveys and semi-structured interviews. As a result, a sophisticated definition of emotional highs is proposed.*

**Keywords:** Experiential learning, adults, emotional highs, positive emotions, hermeneutic phenomenology

---

## Introduction

In early childhood, many perceive learning with great joy and excitement. Encountering their first learning experiences, children passionately talk about what they learned, demonstrating an intrinsic satisfaction to find things out. Becoming older however, many adults gradually seem to lose their sense of intrinsic excitement to engage with learning (Willis, 2007). Some explain this phenomenon in relation to the increasing responsibilities of becoming an adult; like work, family and social roles, and as a result, not having enough time and energy to pursue 'learning' (Lieb & Goodlad, 2005). Others claim it to be due to limited language, literacy or numeracy skills (Dymock, 2007).

In the literature, formal learning is commonly considered to be among the pivotal factors that assist in 'deforming' the understanding of what 'learning' is. An increasing number of scholars (e.g. Olson, 2009) argue that the contemporary notion of learning has become painfully disconnected from learners themselves. Learning has become something we must do. In the middle of the 20th century Einstein stated that "it is in fact nothing short of a miracle that the modern methods of instruction have not yet entirely strangled the holy curiosity of inquiry" (1949:17). Sadly, learners still face similar challenges and approach learning as something one must do. In an environment where learners are supposed to accurately demonstrate what they have learned through a single test or where there is little room to guide what is important to learn, it is rather challenging to engage someone with learning (Wolter-Gustavson, 2004). Olson (2009) warns that by continuing on this course, learning environments might soon reach the level where learners do things *only* for external reasons, numbing their internal curiosities and motivations. This study joins this discussion and considers approaches that attempt to shift from 'doing learning' to 'engaging with learning'.

## Background

Learning from experience occurs in all human settings, from schools to workplaces, from research laboratories to the aisles of the local supermarket. It encompasses all life stages, from childhood and adolescence to middle and old age (Kolb, 1984). Beard & Wilson (2013) point out the ubiquitous availability of learning from experience. It is among the most fundamental means of learning available to everyone.

Experiential learning is understood differently by different people. Among the most common concepts are adventure learning, professional development training, corporate experiential learning, personal development, experience-based training and development, outdoors education or outdoor management development (Hayllar, 2000).

Engagement with experience, for instance, is regarded as crucial in experiential learning. According to Beard & Wilson, so-called experiential learning is “the sense-making process of active engagement between the inner world of the person and the outer world of the environment” (2013:26). The importance of engagement also comes across in other studies, ‘Learning can only occur if the experience of the learner is engaged, at least at some level’ (Boud, Cohen & Walker, 1993:8).

In this study ‘experiential learning’ is understood as an individual and interpersonal experiencing process that deals with personal growth, development and self-actualisation issues. This understanding is similar to that described by an experiential learning group in a study by Weil & McGill (1989). According to the group, experiential learning focuses on change, particularly in terms of personal autonomy, self-fulfilment and interpersonal effectiveness.

According to Dewey (1938/1975), learning often is seen in association with an overwhelming focus on the cognitive side of learning and this has quite profoundly alienated learners from their affective selves. For some time emotions have been viewed as ‘non-intellectual’ feelings that are out of human control and may be detrimental to learning. Although this paradigm may still be present in some cases, the discourse on emotions in learning has gradually progressed and changed (e.g. Headrick, Renshaw, Davids, Pinder & Araújo, 2015).

Some studies (e.g. Artino, 2012; Kim & Pekrun, 2014) indicate that emotional dimensions have an important role to play in learning. They are considered among the pivotal themes in such learning theories as experiential learning (Jordi, 2011) or transformative learning (Mezirow, 2009). In fact, emotions are not only considered to have a significant effect on learning (Jarvis, 2006), but learning is not likely to happen in the absence of emotions (Damasio, 2000; Meyer & Turner, 2002).

Emotional dimensions support the foundation on which practical and conceptual modes of learning are based (Dirkx, 2001). According to Damasio (1994), pure thought untainted by emotion is less useful than commonly supposed. Cognitive actions, including reflection, should not be perceived solely as a feature of mind. Mind is deeply affected by emotions and, in fact, rational decisions are likely to be based on emotions. In other words, alienating emotions from cognitive aspects is, strictly speaking, impossible, as emotions are an integral part of thinking rationally.

Recognition and involvement of emotional experiences are commonly used to engage learners in adult experiential learning. These experiences are not only considered as crucial for the learning process, but emotions always refer to the self being in the world, providing a means for developing self-knowledge. Emotions are an integral part of how we interpret and make sense of the events in our lives (Dirkx, 2001).

Whilst the scholarly literature frequently attempts to discriminate between ‘emotions’, ‘feelings’, ‘moods’, ‘sensations’ and ‘affect’ in well-defined ways (e.g. Scherer, 2005), this process often involves a degree of rough reductionism that comes at the expense of the grey areas between these categories (Griffiths, 1995). These attempts fail to acknowledge that what we call ‘emotions’ and how we experience them, gain their meaning as part of a wider sociocultural frame. The mutability and intangible nature of ‘the emotions’, as well as their emergence from constantly changing social, cultural and historical contexts, implies that they are unlikely to be amenable to specific categorization (Lupton, 1998).

Emotions in this paper are understood in a simple way: as human experiences. Based on the work of Hochschild (2003/1983), emotions are approached as means that assist in understanding one’s relationship-to-the-world. In this way rather than approaching emotions as a pre-existent response syndrome, they are seen as something that is unique to each individual. In this way the experience of emotion depends on how it is experienced and interpreted by the learner.

An increasing amount of studies dealing with emotional experiences are concerned with those moments that are perceived as positive. Disregarded for a long time, positive emotions have been researched as

being related to several benefits in learning; particularly in the last two decades. Among some of the benefits are engagement (Rowe, Fitness & Wood, 2015), safety (Cohen, 2006), being creative, pushing limits (Fredrickson, 2004), building social skills (Waugh & Fredrickson, 2006) and interpersonal satisfaction (Vacharkulksemsuk & Fredrickson, 2013).

The variety of benefits positive emotions can bring to the learning environment and the limited amount of literature studying this area, indicate the necessity for further research and underpin the foundation of this study. Scholars in the area (e.g. Fredrickson, 1998; Kohn, 2004) assert that more studies on positive emotions are needed. This is not simply to even up the balance of knowledge between negative and positive emotions, but more critically, to guide application and interventions to improve learners' well-being and efficiency.

### **Research problems**

The literature draws attention to some of the problems in the area of experiential learning. One of the major problems is related to the need to recognise the complexity of studying positive emotions in learning. Positive emotions appear to be far more complex phenomena than commonly assumed. Emerging literature, for instance, shows that positive emotions tend to be beneficial for the learning environment (e.g. Beard & Wilson, 2013; Fredrickson, 2013). Nevertheless, understanding of how these processes take place is limited and weakly explored. This is particularly important as learning environments, like experiential learning courses, can be vulnerable and emotional experiences are commonly used as triggers for reflection. Incomplete understanding of emotional experiences prevents us from integrating and dealing with positive emotions in learning settings.

More divergent research on positive emotions in learning is needed. Specifically, studies, that acknowledge not only uncertainty in the domain of positive emotions, but also illustrate more sophisticated and innovative methodological solutions on how to approach emotions, should be undertaken.

### **The phenomenon of the study**

To demonstrate the phenomenon of this study, different scholars use

different terms and metaphors to describe a seemingly particular state of being that learners commonly experience during or after experiential learning activities. To describe this experience, Schoel, Prouty & Radcliffe (1988), for instance, label it as ‘peak experience’. Hebb (1955) refers to similar experiences as an ‘optimal arousal’, Heron (1996) – ‘imaginal awakening’, whereas Harris (1996) simply calls it ‘energy’. Likewise, Hayllar (2000) uses a chain of words to describe experiences of being ‘excited’, ‘valued’, ‘fantastic’, ‘worthwhile’ and ‘reinvented’.

Although these scholars use different wording, they seem to relate to similar experiences observed in, but not limited to, experiential learning settings. Something happens in experiential learning courses that learners find meaningful and valuable at some point in time. For an unspecified period, they feel positively changed: excited, worthwhile and reinvented. These moments are not only highly regarded by learners but also come across as uniquely beneficial. Instead of using a chain of words, this paper proposes referring to these experiences as ‘emotional highs’. The focus of the paper is to pin down the phenomenon of emotional highs and clarify the ambiguity of its lived experience.

The notion of ‘emotional high’ is suggested as the phenomenon and point of interest for the study. An emotional high, as inspired by Briscoe’s paper on inherent joy in learning, is seen as “inner deep satisfaction a person feels when they have learned something that they wished to learn” (2012:78). The notion of emotional high is used to describe an optimal experience in learning settings and, initially, is proposed as a proxy with a possibility for further changes. To study the phenomenon, a deliberate decision was made to approach emotional high as an experience. In this way it allows illumination of features and particularities of emotional highs.

This leads to the main question of the paper: what is the ‘lived experience’ of emotional highs in learning? The decision to return to the fundamental basis and focus on learners’ experiences is taken to avoid adapting accounts and models that may be inadequate to study positive emotional experiences. Studying learners’ ‘lived experience’ can showcase more grounded understanding of the phenomenon and advance methodology on studying emotional experiences.

Notably, this paper does not aim to encourage high levels of positive emotions in most learning situations; nor does it extol positive emotions

as being the single answer to the challenges in experiential learning. Rather, this research attempts to provide a more sophisticated take on the phenomenon, demonstrate more grounded methodology to study emotional experiences and assist in better understanding how to deal with positive emotional experiences in the learning environment.

### **Conduct of the study**

Hermeneutic phenomenology is selected as a suitable approach as it focuses on the lived experience of learners and, furthermore, returns to the basics of positive emotions and assists in understanding what it *is*. Hermeneutic phenomenology is seen as a “philosophy that glories in the concreteness of person – world relations and accords lived experience, with all its indeterminacy and ambiguity, primacy over the known” (Wertz, 2005:175). Thus, hermeneutic phenomenology enables the research to capture the human experience to provide a better understanding of learners’ individual accounts with clarity and meaning.

This study requires the selection of learning events that allow the phenomenon to emerge and be accessible. Experiential learning courses are well-known for dealing with emotional highs and lows (Andresen, Boud & Cohen, 2000) and, thus, are to be selected. Preferably, courses where the phenomenon typically emerges multiple times and in multiple ways are to be considered to provide more experiences for the learners to reflect upon. Furthermore, to address the research question particular learners need to be selected. They should have participated in an experiential learning course and experienced the phenomenon of emotional highs.

This study focused on lived experiences of adult learners who participated in three adult experiential learning courses in Australia. There were two different Outward Bound (OB) courses and one conducted by Collective Possibilities (CP). All courses were leadership-themed, involved experiential learning activities and aimed to foster personal growth, development, self-actualisation and included social aspects. The courses were residential (OB1 – 8 days, OB2 – 7 days, CP – 4 days) and took place with an equal number of days indoors and outdoors.

A typical sample size for a phenomenological study is up to ten people

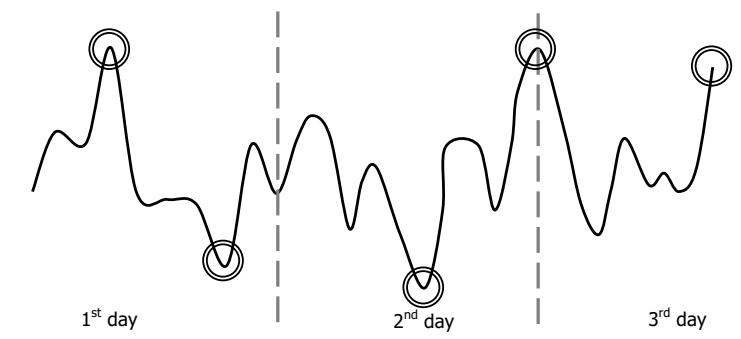
(Starks & Trinidad, 2007). Nevertheless a number of other scholars (e.g. Larkin, Watts & Clifton, 2006) claim that the number of participants can vary depending on the nature of the study and the data collected. This paper is a part of a larger study where another research question was included and, therefore, involves slightly more than ten participants.

This study focused on the experiences of fifteen selected participants from the three courses; on average five participants per course. The number of adult learners in most courses was comparatively low: OB1 – 12; OB2 – 8 and CP – 18. The selected sample was diverse in age, gender and location: ages ranged from mid-twenties to early seventies and involved a similar number of men and women representing different states of Australia.

This study followed a two stage research design. The first stage of the research involved a short questionnaire, which participants received at the end of the course. The purpose of the questionnaire was to identify and select participants with relevant experiences, not to use them as data. The second and most important stage involved in-depth interviews with participants who had agreed to engage further with the study.

The interview consisted of two interwoven parts: an emotional graph and reflection. First of all, the participants were to construct an emotional graph (see Figure 1) which focused on their emotional experiences throughout the course. When finished, most graphs resembled a heart rate diagram with several peaks and lows. Learners were invited to speak about their highs and lows.

**Figure 1.** Example of emotional graph



## **Data analysis**

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was used for analysis in this hermeneutic phenomenological study. IPA is a qualitative research approach that has significant roots in phenomenology, symbolic interactionism and discourse analysis. Overall, the approach explores how people make sense of their experiences (Smith, Larkin & Flowers, 2009) and is a particularly useful methodology for examining topics which are ambiguous, complex and emotionally laden (Smith & Osborn, 2015). IPA, similarly to hermeneutic phenomenology, ‘gives a voice’ to the participants and highlights the value of their narratives.

A 6-step approach, proposed by Smith, Flowers & Larkin (2009), was used to analyse data in the study. The first step is reading and re-reading, which involves engaging with the original data. The second step includes initial noting, which is the most detailed part. Developing emergent themes is the third step, which is followed by step four: to map connections and patterns between the notes. Finally, the last two steps involve moving to the next case and repeating these steps and, eventually, illuminating patterns across cases.

## **Limitations**

The main limitations of this study are largely related to the use of the phenomenological process. The nature of this process is to delve into the accounts of the chosen sample who have experienced similar phenomena, which eventually assists with illumination of the essential particularities of an experience.

The small sample size limited this study. By typically involving a small sample size, phenomenological studies are not generalisable to the larger population. Nevertheless, the accounts gathered were lived experiences that were true for this group of people. Similarly, learning contexts were limited. The selected courses involved relatively similar methodology, philosophy, facilitation and expected outcomes. More diverse courses could have showcased more divergent outcomes.

## **Results**

Overall, the lived experience of emotional highs differed widely in

length, strength and complexity. For some, the high experience was related with experiencing certain emotions, like “really content feeling” (Diane CP), “inherently happy” (Susan OB2), for others - overcoming a challenge. Leanne (CP), for instance, shared her emotional high that is related to other people. It was when participants were divided into personality – head, heart and gut – groups based on a test they did as a part of the course.

I was in a heart group with other heart people. It made a lot of sense to me being with those people in my team. I found my other people! It was sort of connecting and getting along with those people (Leanne CP).

On the other hand, the highest moment for Robert (OB1) was being at the top of the mountain. Being on top of, and in relation with, the mountain appeared in a number of places during his narrative.

We were outside at the top of the mountain. I was at the peak and I was looking around the tips and mountain ranges. Whichever way I looked, I was on top of the mountain. I knew I didn't have to carry that backpack and climb the hill anymore (Robert OB1).

Despite the fact the emotional highs were unique for each individual, a closer examination of the occasions participants reported reveals that there were two: abseiling and Value path, that were referred to as emotional high moments in most narratives. These occasions were a part of the two OB courses and participants referred to them not only as emotional highs, but also regarded them as ‘meaning-full’ and ‘life-changing’ experiences.

The first activity, abseiling was a part of a leadership activity. The task was given late in the night and it required preparation from scratch for the abseiling and zip line activities within the next twenty-four hours. Several participants of a group were selected to lead this activity from scratch.

Abseiling was a 25 metre drop which started on the top of a mountain. A few people were scared. Selected participant-leaders talked to these people, assuring them all was well. They tried to make them feel comfortable and encouraged them. These leaders stressed that it was

important to relate to other group members that they had met only a few days before.

Among the participant-leaders for the abseiling activity was Caitlin. Being a typically quiet person, Caitlin did not hide her astonishment about acting as a different leader, not as she was used to. As she narrated the abseiling experience, it appeared as if physically she was not the person leading and supporting the team. It seemed that she was in another person's shoes. "I have never really stepped up... I normally lead in a different, a very quiet way." Asked to justify this difference, she contended: "I had a responsibility. I had a role then".

Similarly, abseiling was amongst the emotional highs for Susan (OB2). She revealed that at her age of 50+, she never thought she could enjoy abseiling. "I abseiled for the first time in my life and it was just awesome. I had the best experience". It was positive as well as surprising experience for Susan.

Another popular occasion for emotional highs was a Value path that for many was a personal break-through point. Value path was an activity where participants spent around two hours walking through the field alone and reflecting on, and connecting with, their values. Participants were set off in the field around fifteen minutes apart from each other and were not allowed to talk or walk along with others. The Value path involved minimal guidance, providing a few triggering questions or activities to reflect upon. Participants had a large space and time in which to wander around and engage with themselves. The Value path was followed by reflection among the group members.

Many referred to the Value path as their emotional peak experience. Being on the Value path was "a reflection of you as a person. This is a ve-ry, ve-ry personal journey. For two and half hours you are not talking to anybody" Kirra (OB1). Likewise, Thomas (OB1) contended that the Value path was powerful and came at the right time in his life. He is a busy businessmen and emphasised that a lack of time is often the reason for not having similar experiences in everyday life.

That was pretty special for me. Because I do work in an incredibly fast paced environment. I don't have time to think about myself and what I've done, what I've been able to achieve and where I want to go next (Thomas OB1).

## Findings

According to the analysed data, six themes emerged to showcase the particularities of the lived experience of emotional highs in adult experiential learning:

- *Facing the unknown.* There is a type of genuine excitement about interacting with the unknown. Some people refer to these experiences as uncomfortable, while others emphasise the abundance of adrenaline and joy while interacting with the unknown. The unknown appears through interactions with the world as well as experiences within; often both together. Nature in particular comes across as a rich provider of unknown experiences. Building a bridge between the unknown and known can contribute significantly to emotional highs.
- *First-time experience.* Many emotional highs take place during or after doing something meaningful for the first time. This includes experiences like abseiling or reflecting on your values with strangers. These moments can occur through a wide spectrum of chaotic, nonlinear, but ultimately, meaningful learning experiences. First-time experiences can be filled not only with something new, but also unusual, surprising and stimulating. At times they are seen as sacred and irreplicable.
- *Unexpected discovery.* Many emotional highs are based on discoveries. A discovery here can be seen as a cognitive A-ha moment or a change of old ways of knowing, similar to what Mezirow calls ‘disorienting dilemma’ (Mezirow, 1990). Emotional high experiences however seem to go beyond cognitive awareness; it is rather an embodied experience. Unexpected discoveries frequently take place when a learner notices the grey areas between ‘what I think’ and ‘what I do’. They can take place through a collation of different emotions and, notably, contribute to an emotional high.
- *Being on a journey.* Emotional highs are associated with temporarily leaving one’s everyday life. A sense of being on a journey, path, road or travel is present. Quite often participants refer to it as a learning journey, personal development and

progressing. The importance of sharing the journey has been highlighted as a significant part of experiencing emotional highs.

- *Sense of change.* This typically involves newness or difference in the way a learner is bodily aware of themselves. This is perceived not solely as a change from state A to state B; it rather comes across as a fluid experience of progress, moving on. The change can be associated with different dimensions of the learner, including the emotional, bodily and spiritual, and can affect one's actions, thinking and values. The learner quite often is aware of this change, and yet, this awareness appears to go beyond pure cognition. At times it cannot be grasped in the form of words, implying it is an embodied phenomenon.
- *Meaningful learning.* Learning here appears to go beyond the learning environment and is applicable to a real life context. That makes learning personalised, worthwhile and, more importantly, meaningful. Quite often learners claim to be energised and awakened during these learning experiences. By the same token, at times learners perceive it as 'not real learning', as it involves features typically not associated with conventional learning.

### **Contribution to knowledge**

An important intention of this work was to understand how these findings contribute to the areas of experiential learning and positive emotional experiences. Based on the observations from these themes, the following two contributions to knowledge are to be considered. The first contribution involves implications for studying positive emotional experiences. The second and, the most important, contribution is the development of a sophisticated understanding of emotional high experiences.

### **Implications for studying positive emotional experiences**

This paper states that it is problematic to apply conventional models of emotions to study positive emotional experiences. This can be challenging due to limited understanding of the emotional system. Some of the emotional models include certain assumptions that inhibit the area of enquiry. To prevent conceptual misunderstandings, this paper

proposes studying emotions, including emotional highs, as experiences. Studying positive emotions as experiences can allow noticing and understanding the particularities of the phenomenon rather than approaching emotions as pre-existent models. Taking this approach, two aspects were observed.

Emotional highs are a more complex phenomenon than literature suggests. This study observes that emotional highs go beyond being just a synonym for positive emotions or a group of extreme positive emotions. The highs can embrace a wide spectrum of emotions and experiences; many of them happening simultaneously. Several cases also illustrate the presence of emotional low experiences. In fact, this study observes that very low emotions can be pivotal for the emergence of emotional highs. This contributes to a discourse that positive emotional experiences can no longer be seen as something that is exclusively positive. Instead, this study suggests that there is a wide range of emotions that constantly interact, all contributing to the development of an experience.

This study also observes that emotional highs no longer can be seen as extreme emotions. It is true that learners referred to emotional highs as the highest peak experiences on the Emotional graph. Quite frequently these experiences were seen as strong and powerful, at times even reaching moments of imaginal awakening or euphoria.

Whilst an emotional high can be perceived as a state of extreme high, after having a closer look at the experience, it appears as anything but extreme. Quite often the phenomenon comes across as rather mellow and soothing. For instance, the Value path activity involved medium intensity experiences, some of which were mild and meditative. This implies that an emotional high cannot be seen as a specific type of emotion experienced in the same way by everyone. In terms of learning, it is useful to see the phenomenon as an experience of different intensities.

### **Re-considering emotional highs**

The most important contribution of the study is the development of a sophisticated understanding of emotional high experiences. A number of salient particularities and features of the phenomenon have been observed. Emotional highs appear as relatively rare, unique learning-

related moments that are unlikely to happen in everyday life. The high is typically experienced as a simple, uncomplicated moment that in one or another way makes sense of something meaningful to the learner. Often there is a certain clarity about something that matters, that does not necessarily emerge through cognitive dimensions. This clarity frequently comes across as embodied experience; something that is *bodily known*.

A crucial part of emotional high experiences is a sense of enrichment, expansion and development. At times it is a sense of being more of a person than one thought they could be. These moments are often associated with higher order clarities, like values, attitudes and beliefs. Whilst emotional highs can appear as an experience that focuses exclusively on individual dimensions, they are individual as much as social phenomena. In fact, social context is an integral part of these experiences.

In short, emotional highs are seen as important learning experiences. They are experienced as moments where many things come together and more broadly can be perceived as ‘settledness’, being at home in one’s life.

Based on these particularities that illuminate the experience of emotional highs, this research reframes the notion of emotional highs. A proxy, inspired by Briscoe (2012), was used to enter the field of enquiry to contribute to a discourse on positive emotional experiences. Tentatively, Briscoe pointed out the need to initiate a discussion on understanding positive emotional experiences specifically in the context of learning. By doing that, one would attempt to learn how to engage with learning, actualise learners’ potential and abilities, celebrating the right of each individual to exercise their creative individuality. To contribute to this debate, Briscoe proposed a phenomenon described as “inner deep satisfaction a person feels when they have learned something that they wished to learn” (2012:78).

Briscoe’s definition is certainly an important starting point in the discourse of positive emotional experiences. She advocates focussing on emotions as context situated phenomena; in her case focus on positive emotions in the learning environment is useful. Individual and social dimensions of the phenomenon are also pointed out.

Based on research data, this study proposes several modifications to Briscoe's definition that will elaborate the further development of the phenomenon. Firstly, this research suggests studying emotional highs as experiences. That enhances freedom in understanding what the phenomenon is, rather than making assumptions that can be misleading and irrelevant for particular settings. In terms of learning, approaching emotion as an experience can open new avenues. These include perceiving an emotional high not solely as a rootless phenomenon, but also recognising triggers as a part of the experience. Furthermore, studying emotion as an experience can assist in embracing different dimensions of phenomena, including emotional as well as bodily, cognitive and spiritual.

Secondly, Briscoe observes that the phenomenon occurs when one learns something they 'wished to learn'. This is an important note, particularly when contemplating authenticity and motivation of the learner. Yet this study observes that experience frequently presents itself without being *wished* to happen and that *unwished* experience can still lead to emotional highs and meaningful learning. In other words, emotional experience here is seen as something that emerges in relationship with the world and that may or may not include experiences that we necessarily aim for.

Finally, the third proposed modification is to situate the phenomenon in an organised learning context. This does not mean that the experience cannot emerge outside organised learning settings. In fact, although some learners claimed that emotional highs are unique experiences that are difficult to replicate outside the courses, others confirmed imagining such a possibility. The main argument here is that placing the phenomenon into a context may assist illuminating particular features of emotional experiences.

Based on these three modifications, this study defines an emotional high as *inner deep satisfaction a learner experiences when they have absorbed something meaningful*. This definition could be a valuable starting point for practitioners and scholars working on future research in this area.

## **Conclusions**

Something happens in experiential learning that some learners find meaningful and valuable. At some point in time and for an unspecified period, some learners feel positively changed: reinvented and worthwhile. These moments are not only highly regarded by learners but also come across as uniquely beneficial for those involved in teaching and learning. Instead of using a chain of words by several scholars, this paper proposes referring to these experiences as ‘emotional highs’.

Based on Briscoe’s (2012) understanding, emotional high has been proposed as the phenomenon of this study. According to the lived experiences of learners, six themes emerged to feature particularities of emotional highs. Combining the findings of the study and literature, the notion of emotional highs was refined and defined as “inner deep satisfaction a learner experiences when they have absorbed something meaningful”.

This is a starting point for continuing discourse on specific positive emotional experiences in learning settings. Concepts, notions and findings of this study, especially the notion of emotional highs, are open to further refinement. Future studies can apply the current understanding of the phenomenon in different learning contexts and other fields.

Further research is needed on emotional highs as a social phenomenon. Some studies (e.g. Rantala & Määttä, 2012) suggest that positive emotions in social situations can be contagious. Similarly, this study observed cases where emotional highs appeared as experiences shared by several participants. This is an invitation to consider studying emotional highs not only as emotional experiences owned by a single learner, but as a shared phenomenon. To study this, more innovative and social methods and approaches would be required.

Practitioners should be aware of the lived experiences, their sensitivities and triggers of emotional highs when designing courses. Attempting to understand and to find triggers of emotional highs may be useful and beneficial for practitioners who seek to recognise and find ways to deal with positive emotional experiences in the learning environment. In particular, more understanding is needed on how these triggers

interact. Rather than approaching triggers as individual elements that act independently, a robust understanding of the relationships they form would be useful.

This paper started with an observation that learning has become painfully disconnected from learners themselves. If current trends continue, learning settings may soon reach the level where learners do things only for external reasons, numbing their internal motivations and emotions. This study attempted to advance understanding of how to engage with learning and demonstrate that the presence of emotional high experiences can assist in making learning meaningful and worthwhile. There is still a way to go in terms of understanding positive emotions. However, what we can do now is to think about learning spaces as places where emotional highs are the norm rather than rare experiences found in exclusive learning settings.

## Acknowledgements

This paper is based on a larger research project that focuses on lived experience of emotional highs in experiential learning settings (Zeivots, 2015).

## References

- Andresen, L., Boud, D., & Cohen, R. (2000) 'Experience-based learning', in G. Foley (ed.) *Understanding adult education and training*. Second edition. Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 225-239.
- Artino, A. R. (2012) 'Emotions in online learning environments: Introduction to the special issue', in *The Internet and Higher Education*, 15: 3, 137-140.
- Beard, C. & Wilson, J. P. (2013) *Experiential learning: A handbook for education, training and coaching*. London: Kogan Page Publishers.
- Boud, D., Cohen, R. & Walker, D. (1993) *Using Experience for Learning*. Milton Keynes: Society for Research into Higher Education and Open University Press.
- Briscoe, F. M. (2012) 'Anarchist, Neoliberal & Democratic Decision-Making: Deepening the Joy in Learning and Teaching', in *Educational Studies*, 48: 1, 76-102.
- Cohen, J. (2006) 'Social, emotional, ethical, and academic education: Creating a climate for learning, participation in democracy, and well-being', in *Harvard Educational Review*, 76: 2, 201-237.
- Damasio, A. R. (1994) *Descartes' error: Emotion, rationality and the human*

- brain*. New York: Putnam.
- Damasio, A. R. (2000) *The feeling of what happens: Body and emotion in the making of consciousness*. Harcourt: Chicago.
- Dewey, J. (1938/1975) *Education and experience*. New York: Macmillan.
- Dirkx, J. M. (2001) 'The power of feelings: Emotion, imagination, and the construction of meaning in adult learning'. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*, 89, 63-72.
- Dymock, D. (2007) *Engaging adult learners: The role of non-accredited learning in language, literacy and numeracy*. Canberra: Adult Learning Australia.
- Einstein, A. (1949) 'Autobiographical notes', in P. A. Schilpp (ed.), *Albert Einstein: Philosopher - Scientist*. La Salle: Open Court Publishing Company.
- Fredrickson, B. L. (1998) 'What good are positive emotions?', in *Review of General Psychology*, 2: 3, 300.
- Fredrickson, B. L. (2004) 'The broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions', in *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B: Biological Sciences*, 359, 1367-1378.
- Fredrickson, B. L. (2013) 'Positive emotions broaden and build', in *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, 47, 1-53.
- Griffiths, M. (1995) *Feminisms and the self: The web of identity*. London: Routledge.
- Harris, J. B. (1996) 'Animating learning in teams: a Gestalt approach', in D. Boud & N. Miller (eds.), *Working with experience: Animating learning*. London: Routledge, 157-170.
- Hayllar, B. (2000) *Outdoor management development: A phenomenological analysis*. Sydney: University of Technology, Sydney.
- Headrick, J., Renshaw, I., Davids, K., Pinder, R. A. & Araújo, D. (2015) 'The dynamics of expertise acquisition in sport: The role of affective learning design', in *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, 16, 83-90.
- Hebb, D. O. (1955) 'Drives and the CNS (conceptual nervous system)', in *Psychological Review*, 62: 4, 243.
- Heron, J. (1996) 'Helping whole people learn', in D. Boud & N. Miller (eds.) *Working with experience: Animating learning*, 75-94. London: Routledge.
- Hochschild, A. R. (2003/1983) *The managed heart: Commercialization of human feeling*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Jarvis, P. (2006) *The theory and practice of teaching* (2nd ed.). London: Routledge.
- Jordi, R. (2011) 'Reframing the concept of reflection: Consciousness, experiential learning, and reflective learning practices', in *Adult Education Quarterly*, 61: 2, 181-197.
- Kim, C. & Pekrun, R. (2014) 'Emotions and motivation in learning and

- performance', in M. J. Spector, M. D. Merrill, J. Elen and M. J. Bishop (eds.), *Handbook of research on educational communications and technology*. New York: Springer, 65-75.
- Kohn, A. (2004) 'The cult of rigor and the loss of joy', in *Education Week*, 24: 3, 6-8.
- Kolb, D. A. (1984) *Experiential learning: Experience as the source of learning and development*. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall.
- Larkin, M., Watts, S., & Clifton, E. (2006) 'Giving voice and making sense in interpretative phenomenological analysis', in *Qualitative research in psychology*, 3: 2, 102-120.
- Lieb, S. (1999) *Principles of adult learning*, viewed 26 April 2016. Available: <[https://www.lindenwood.edu/education/andragogy/andragogy/2011/Lieb\\_1991.pdf](https://www.lindenwood.edu/education/andragogy/andragogy/2011/Lieb_1991.pdf)>.
- Lupton, D. (1998) *The emotional self: A sociocultural exploration*. Thousand Oaks: Sage.
- Meyer, D. K. & Turner, J. C. (2002) 'Discovering emotion in classroom motivation research', in *Educational psychologist*, 37: 2, 107-114.
- Mezirow, J. (1990) *Fostering critical reflection in adulthood: a guide to transformative and emancipatory learning*. Jossey-Bass Publishers.
- Mezirow, J. (2009) 'An overview on transformative learning', in K. Illeris (ed.) *Contemporary theories of learning: learning theorists... in their own words*. London: Routledge, 90-105.
- Olson, K. (2009) *Wounded by school: Recapturing the Joy in Learning and Standing Up to Old School Culture*. New York: Teachers College, Columbia University.
- Rantala, T. & Määttä, K. (2012) 'Ten theses of the joy of learning at primary schools', in *Early Child Development & Care*, 182: 1, 87-105.
- Rowe, A. D., Fitness, J. & Wood, L. N. (2015) 'University student and lecturer perceptions of positive emotions in learning', in *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 28: 1, 1-20.
- Scherer, K. R. (2005) 'What are emotions? And how can they be measured?', in *Social science information*, 44: 4, 695-729.
- Schoel, J., Prouty, D., & Radcliffe, P. (1988) *Islands of healing: A guide to adventure based counseling*. Hamilton: Project Adventure, Inc.
- Smith, J. A., Larkin, M. & Flowers, P. (2009) *Interpretative phenomenological analysis: Theory, method and research*. London: Sage.
- Smith, J. A. & Osborn, M. (2015) 'Interpretative phenomenological analysis as a useful methodology for research on the lived experience of pain', in *British Journal of Pain*, 9: 1, 41-42.
- Starks, H., & Trinidad, S. B. (2007) 'Choose your method: A comparison of

- phenomenology, discourse analysis, and grounded theory', in *Qualitative health research*, 17: 10, 1372-1380.
- Vacharkulksemsuk, T. & Fredrickson, B. L. (2013) 'Looking back and glimpsing forward: The Broaden-and-Build Theory of Positive Emotions as applied to organizations', in *Advances in Positive Organizational Psychology*, 1, 45-60.
- Waugh, C. E. & Fredrickson, B. L. (2006) 'Nice to know you: Positive emotions, self-other overlap and complex understanding in the formation of a new relationship', in *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, 1: 2, 93-106.
- Weil, S. W. & McGill, I. (1989) 'A framework for making sense of experiential learning', in S. W. Weil & I. McGill (eds.), *Making sense of experiential learning: Diversity in theory and practice*. Buckingham: Open University Press, 3-24.
- Wertz, F. J. (2005) 'Phenomenological research methods for counseling psychology', in *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 52: 2, 167-177.
- Willis, J. (2007) 'The Neuroscience of Joyful Education', in *Educational Leadership*, 64, 1-5.
- Wolter-Gustavson, M. (2004) 'Why I will not become a teacher', in *Teacher Education Quarterly*, 31: 4, 85-90.
- Zeivots (2015). *Lived experience of emotional highs in experiential learning*. Unpublished Ph D thesis. University of Technology Sydney.

## About the Author

**Sandris Zeivots** is a Research Associate at the University of Technology Sydney. Sandris' professional background is in experiential learning, outdoors education, emotions and innovation. His work experience ranges from facilitating experiential learning courses in European and Latin-American contexts to researching in the Australian learning environment.

## Contact details

*Sandris Zeivots  
International Research Centre for Youth Futures  
Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences  
University of Technology Sydney  
15 Broadway  
Ultimo NSW 2007*

*Email: Sandris.Zeivots@uts.edu.au, Sandris.Zeivots@gmail.com*