

EMOTIONS IN A VIETNAMESE TEACHER'S IDENTITY

Duong Thanh Hao¹, Nguyen Van Thinh², Dang Xuan Son³

¹ Thai Nguyen University of Economics and Business Administration & PhD Candidate - Vietnam National University - University of Languages and International Studies, Vietnam

² Thai Nguyen University of Economics and Business Administration

³ The Center for Defense and Security Education of Thai Nguyen University

Abstract

This paper presents an emotional cognitive psychosocial framework, derived from Richard Lazarus, to understand how teachers' identities can be affected in the context of reform. The emphasis of this method is on the cognitive-emotional processes of each teacher, allowing us to understand details of what the teacher is experiencing or personal, ethical and social concerns. To illustrate the usefulness of this approach, a case of a Vietnamese high school is passionate about reform. Analyze his enthusiasm for reforms, and feelings of anxiety, anger, guilt and shame related to how the reforms take place in his school and affect his work. The results show the many ways that his identity and concern are affected, resulting in a loss of enthusiasm for reform.

Keywords: *teacher emotion; teacher identity; educational reform*

1. Introduction

In the recent innovation literature, the crucial role of teachers for successful implementation of reforms is more widely recognized than several decades ago when a more technical rationalistic approach to innovation predominated

In this paper, we would like to contribute to this issue by using a cognitive social-psychological theory on emotions, as put forth by Lazarus (1991, 1999), to explore what teachers have at stake in a context of reforms. To illustrate the usefulness of this theoretical framework, a case study of a reform-enthusiast secondary school teacher in Vietnam, who teaches English language, will be presented. The analysis of the narratives of this teacher gives insights into being a secondary school teacher in English language in the context of the multiple reforms that are now taking place in Vietnam. How does the teacher appraise and emotionally experience the multiple reforms? What personal, social, or moral concerns are affected? How does the teacher deal with the contradictory expectations in relation to his teacher colleagues and the management team of his school? What are the resources of support?

2. Theoretical background

To conceptualize the relationships between cognitive and affective processes, we use Lazarus' (1991, 1999) social-psychological theory of emotions. According to Lazarus, the processes that give rise to emotions involve relational, motivational, and cognitive aspects (Lazarus, 1991). Relational implies that emotions always concern person-environment relations, which can either harm (for the negative emotions) or benefit (for the positive emotions) the individual in question. Person-environment relations can change with the circumstances and/or over time and thus give rise to different emotions. Motivational implies that emotions and moods are reactions to the status of our goals during everyday encounters and our lives in general. The concept of motivation helps clarify what makes a particular encounter relevant, either as a source of harm or a source of benefit, and thus emotional. Cognitive implies that emotions involve some basic knowledge and an appraisal of what is happening during a particular encounter. Basic knowledge consists of situational and generalized beliefs about how things work, and it is apt to be more cold than emotional. Appraisal involves an evaluation of the personal significance of what is happening during an encounter with the environment. In the case of a mature individual, the appraisal of a situation tends to be heavily influenced by social-cultural variables and personal development.

The social-psychological approach of Lazarus (1991, 1999) understands the meaning of emotions by analyzing the core relational theme and primary and secondary appraisals of each emotion. A core relational theme is the central harm or benefit in an encounter that underlies each specific kind of emotion. Negative emotions are caused by harmful relationships between the individual and the environment, positive emotions by beneficial relationships

(Lazarus, 1991). For the current research, relevant examples of negative emotions (as will be shown in Section 4) are anger, anxiety, guilt, and shame. The core relational theme in the case of anger refers to a “demeaning offense against me and mine” (Lazarus, 1991, p. 222). In the case of anxiety, the core relational theme refers to an uncertain, existential threat (p. 235). Guilt is generated by having done, or wanting to do, something which is regarded as morally reprehensible (p. 240). And shame refers to a failure to live up to an ego-ideal (p. 241). An example of a positive emotion, which will be relevant for the current research, is happiness or enthusiasm. Happiness occurs when the individual thinks he or she is making reasonable progress toward the realization of a goal (p. 267).

To determine the core relational theme, or which concerns are affected, the individual appraises the situation. This appraisal process is analyzed by Lazarus in terms of primary and secondary appraisals. Primary appraisals refer to an assessment of whether something of relevance to the person's concerns has occurred. The environment can constitute, as Lazarus describes them, situational demands, which can form harm or benefit for the individual. Lazarus distinguishes three primary appraisal components: goal relevance, goal congruence or incongruence, and goal content or type of ego-involvement.

The secondary appraisal refers to the evaluation of the options and resources an individual has to cope with the situation and future prospects. Lazarus distinguishes three components here also: blame or credit, coping potential, and future expectancy.

3. Method

3.1. Data gathering and analyses

The teacher in the current research has taught English language for 20 years at a secondary school in Vietnam and will be called Thuyen. He is actively involved in the implementation of innovations within his classroom and school. He also describes himself as ‘enthusiastic’ about the current innovations.

The data for the present study were collected during several rounds of semi-structured interviews. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed to create written protocols. Before these interview rounds, the researchers and Thuyen had already discussed his work and the current changes. These discussions many times were not audio recorded, but used as input for the interview questions and for a global description of the contextual and personal contours of Thuyen's work as an English language teacher. The first interview took place in January, 2019, and lasted 2.5 h.

The interview instrument was semi-structured. We started the interview with a very global question: how would you describe yourself as a teacher? After this very global question, we asked Thuyen a series of concrete questions on the basis of our theoretical framework (cognitive-affective processes). These questions were designed to help Thuyen explain his perception of his professional identity. Furthermore, Thuyen was asked about the situational demands (the current reforms as they unfold in Thuyen's school and are perceived by Thuyen, the expectations about the way Thuyen is supposed to work, and the extent to which Thuyen agreed with those expectations), and his concerns and emotions related to those situational demands.

Initial analyses of this interview were undertaken based on the theoretical framework to obtain a picture of Thuyen's story, and his professional and ego-identity, his appraisals of the current reforms, the emotions that he had experienced, and the personal, social, and moral concerns that were at stake. Next, the protocol and summary of the initial interview were sent to the teacher for validation. The second interview took place in March, 2019, was based on the written protocol and summary of the first interview. The structure of the second interview was the same as the structure of the first interview, except for the opening question. The purpose of the second interview was to explore Thuyen's cognitive-affective process in greater detail and depth. A final respondent validation took place in November, 2019, (1 h).

For the final analysis, Thuyen's different emotions were taken as a starting point. In line with Lazarus' approach, each emotion is related to specific situational demands and aspects of the person's identity. Furthermore, each emotion has a core relational theme and the relevant appraisals reveal the relationships between the situational demands and one's identity or what the person has at stake in the specific encounter.

3.2. Contextual background: different situational demands

As an English language teacher, Thuyen is confronted with several innovations relating to both teaching and school organizational matters in a university of Vietnam. With regard to school organizational matters, teachers are expected to become involved in school policy matters.

For the subject of English language teacher, the aforementioned changes have major implications. The shift to more constructivist-based models of teaching and learning, along with the introduction of some new examination

guidelines within the framework of the new qualification structure is being operationalized in the form of reading and writing portfolios requiring students to map and document their process with respect to the reading of English novels and writing of texts. The new examination guidelines emphasize process-oriented writing as opposed to product-oriented writing; similarly, students' opinions regarding the literature they read are considered important in addition to literary analysis and literary history. The introduction of reading and writing portfolios provides new roles for both students and teachers. The students themselves are responsible for their portfolios (i.e., the content and the planning). The teacher is expected to help the students by providing recommendations and asking reflective questions, which implies regular reading of the portfolios and regular meetings with individual students. In other words, the teacher in the Study House model of teaching and learning is expected to invest much more time in reading and guidance. This new manner of working has to be realized within the same time schedule and curriculum structure as before, however, and no extra time is typically given for the implementation of this new method of teaching and learning.

4. Results

In this section, the analysis of the case of Thuyen will be presented in two parts. The first part concerns a description of Thuyen's professional situation. In the second part, an analysis of Thuyen's emotions will be presented.

4.1. Descriptive case

Thuyen has been a high school teacher of mother tongue language for about 20 years and works full-time. Thuyen describes himself as enthusiastic about his work with the students and the school; as willing to invest time and energy; as collaborative; as always having an open-door classroom policy; and as always willing to learn.

He is very happy with the implementation of reading and writing portfolios for his subject, but nevertheless experiences an enormous lack of time to actually work with the portfolios.

Working with portfolios requires a lot of time reading, assessing, and interacting with the students. In addition, the portfolios have to be checked each semester, which is three times a year. But in general the mother tongue language teachers are not given any more time to do that, so Thuyen has to work with the portfolios in the same amount of time as he had before portfolios were implemented. Another cause of Thuyen's lack of time is related to the consequences of the introduction of new subjects in the curriculum, for which space in terms of contact hours had to be created. Whereas students were formerly required to take seven subjects at the upper levels of secondary school, they are now required to take fourteen. And, whereas each subject in general used to be given in 4 week, it is now given in 2 h. So, teachers have to give up some of their contact hours which is justified by the constructivist models of teaching in which independent student learning is emphasized. So, Thuyen had fewer contact hours with his students and fewer teaching hours, but he was given two more classes with 30 students each to make up for the time he lost; as a result, Thuyen ended up with 60 more students, and therefore 60 more reading and writing portfolios to manage. A final cause of Thuyen's lack of time refers to his new task in the school organization: his membership on the innovation project team.

4.2. Analytic case

After the outline of the personal contours of Thuyen's professional life as described above, in this section an analysis of the cognitive-affective processes Thuyen's emotions as a starting point will be presented. The analysis of emotions is complex because of the multiple goals that are operating at any given time and in the changes taking place from one moment to the next (Lazarus, 1991).

4.3. Anxiety and anger

Thuyen's story provides several examples of negative emotions (anxiety and anger). The relational core theme of anxiety is in terms of Lazarus an uncertain, existential threat. The following examples seem to indicate an uncertain threat for Thuyen.

A first example refers to Thuyen's emotions of anxiety caused by a decreased work pleasure related to his lack of time:

With regard to Thuyen's anger, two examples can be found in his story. The relation core theme in the case of anger according to Lazarus is a demeaning offense. A first example refers to the school management, with whom Thuyen at one point talks about his time problem and his inability to evaluate the work of students in what he feels is a professional way. He shares explicitly with the school management his students' complaints about the way he deals with the portfolio. In this conversation with the school management, Thuyen says:

This is happening at your school and I am the one doing it.

[The only response of the management was as follows, AU]

There is nothing we can do about it. We'll have to deal with this in a creative manner.

The response of the school management makes Thuyen very angry. In his eyes, the school management neglects his problem and refuses to give a solution: the 'we' that has to deal with the problem in a creative manner refers only to Thuyen and does not include the school management. This way of being neglected by the school management is perceived by Thuyen as a demeaning offense.

The previous analysis of his enthusiasm and anxiety made clear that essential personal, moral, and social concerns are affected. The issue Thuyen discusses with the school management is very relevant for him and he expects to be supported by the school management. However, the response of the school management is incongruent with his expectations. First, the meaning of dealing creatively is that the school management will not give Thuyen extra time or other options, but that he has to solve the problem in his own time and according to his own insights. Second, the response does not deal with the problem in a substantial manner, only in an organizational manner, which indicates that the school management perceives it only as an organizational problem that, moreover, only needs some creativity to be solved. In other words, Thuyen's problem is not so big at all in their eyes. So the response of the school management seems to disqualify Thuyen as a professional teacher, which contributes to his feeling of demeaning offense (personal concern: threat of self-esteem).

4.4. Guilt and shame

In terms of blame, Thuyen directs externally, referring to others giving him insufficient time and no support. However, he also seems to direct internally, referring to his decision to only invest professional time in his work. Though he considers this choice to be legitimate, still he feels guilty toward his students because he is their teacher and, as he says: "they are MY students" [emphasis from Thuyen, AU]. In other words, the circumstances seem to only partly relieve his feelings of guilt that he transgressed his own moral imperatives.

As the previous analysis of Thuyen's enthusiasm showed, the students form one of the most important sources of happiness for Thuyen (social concern). As mentioned in the analysis of his anxiety, his time problem seems to damage his relationship with his students. Although he is enthusiastic about the reforms as opportunities to realize some of his pedagogical ideals and ideological views as a mother tongue language teacher, the way the educational reforms actually unfold makes realizing the educational reforms in his daily practice difficult. In this context, important moral and social concerns of Thuyen are at stake. Because these concerns are very much related to one of the most important sources for his professional identity, working with students, Thuyen has strong feelings of shame and guilt.

4.5. Happiness/enthusiasm

Thuyen is enthusiastic about the notion of reading and writing portfolios.

With regard to goal content at stake, Thuyen's enthusiasm for working with portfolios is also related to essential meanings, other persons and their well-being, moral values, and his self-esteem and job motivation. His view of teaching has a strong ideological connotation when he refers to the society that should not deteriorate into barbarity (moral concern). He also reports perceiving his work as very relevant because of this.

More specifically, the portfolios give him the opportunity to improve as a teacher because he can focus more on the individual learning process (personal concern). In other words, the implementation of the portfolios is for Thuyen not only a different manner of working in an organizational way, but it also influences his professionalism in a positive manner as the following quote summarizes:

In conclusion, the analysis of Thuyen's enthusiasm for working with the portfolios shows the portfolios to be very important for him because of who he is as a teacher and the way he likes to work. As shown, many concerns related to his professional and personal identity are at stake in this change.

5. Conclusion and discussion

The social-psychological approach of emotions, used in this study, enabled us to analyze in depth what concerns a teacher can have at stake in a context of reforms, and how the personal and professional identity is affected by the reforms. In the case of the English language teacher in this study, the analysis of his emotions with regard to the implementation of reading and writing portfolios, as the embodiment of current reforms for him, showed the following. The analysis of his enthusiasm for working with the portfolios indicated that it is a way of working for which he has a long-standing preference. It also constitutes a way of working that his students enjoy, which is

important for him because the students form the core of his work and his work pleasure. It is a way of working in which students will learn more than from teacher-centered approaches to teaching. Furthermore, it corresponds with what he sees as his core teaching task: teaching students to think and reflect. This core teaching task is connected to his views on living in a society, which makes him consider his own work to be very relevant. Besides, it corresponds strongly with his subject, which, is mainly according to him about language, and language is thinking. Another aspect is that it gives him the opportunity to develop professionally and to prevent stagnation and boredom in his work. Finally, it makes him feel that he is becoming a better teacher.

This study, although exploratory in nature, has tried to make a contribution, using an explicit theoretical framework on emotions to increase our understanding of the impact educational reforms can have on a teacher's identity and commitment to change. More research into teachers' emotions and their workplace conditions is needed to show empirically the possible consequences of national, local, and school policies on the quality of teaching of the current and the next generation of teachers.

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