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## EMOTIONAL EFFECTS OF IMPLEMENTING GESTALT THERAPY TECHNIQUES IN UNIVERSITY TEACHING

*Abstract:* The aim of this paper was to examine the emotional effects of implementing Gestalt therapy techniques focused on the emotional experience triggered by the learning process. The sample consisted of 289 students, future teachers and preschool teachers. The research design implied an initial assessment of students' emotional reactions to traditional, frontal teaching (4 lessons of Psychology and 4 English language lessons), an implementation of Gestalt therapy techniques in teaching (also 4 lessons in both subjects) and a final assessment of students' emotional reactions. A *Questionnaire for the self-assessment of emotional reactions to teaching by Shabot and Shabot* was used for the collection of data. Statistically highly significant differences were found regarding the type and intensity of emotional reactions, in favour of the final assessment. Unpleasant emotional reactions such as anxiety, irritability, boredom and discouragement were highly significant ( $p < 0.01$ ) as reactions to traditional teaching, while pleasant emotional reactions of amazement, pleasure, optimism and self-confidence were highly significant ( $p < 0.01$ ) reactions to teaching in which Gestalt therapy techniques were implemented. Highly significant differences ( $p < 0.01$ ) were found in the assessment of other aspects of teaching as well, such as involvement, connection and communication with others. The results indicate the significance of encouraging pleasant emotional reactions in the teaching process.

*Keywords:* emotional aspects of teaching, Gestalt therapy techniques, improvement of university teaching, English language classes.

### INTRODUCTION

In all educational environments, the process of learning is founded on a formal approach to education, meaning that successful learning is closely linked to successful teaching (Shabot & Shabot, 2004). This, more precisely, means that, from the repertoire of various teaching methods the one that will ensure that participants learn needs to be selected, i.e. the one that will initiate a cognitive process leading to the desired outcome (knowledge, skills). The cognitive activity of the participants in the teaching process is a key factor that impacts learning. A specific cognitive activity represents a specific form of learning, and a specific

form of learning enables the realization of a completely determined educational outcome (Sternberg, 2009). On the basis of the differences in the cognitive activities during learning, the current researchers are able to determine the form of learning in question. The efficiency of teaching is, therefore, a direct consequence of the efficient choice of teaching methods. In other words, the educational goal conditions cognitive activity (a form of learning), and the teaching method ensures appropriate cognitive activity (an appropriate form of learning). This leads to the conclusion that all valid approaches to teaching are cognitive, since learning is thought to be primarily a cognitive process aimed at handling information (Neisser, 1967).

This paper starts from the notion argued by contemporary neuroscience, that the cognitive approach is incomplete and incapable to answer all the questions related to the process of learning and all the difficulties involved in it (Chica et al. 2013). A new way of understanding learning and teaching includes the consideration of the role of emotional regulation in educational practice. This approach is focused on emotions and its starting point is that emotions represent an integral part of the teaching process (Gläser-Zikuda, 2013).

## THE INFLUENCE OF EMOTIONS ON COGNITIVE ACTIVITY

Emotionality represents a special dimension of human existence that has, until recently, defied satisfactory scientific and professional conceptualization. The lack of scientific knowledge about emotions is in great dissonance with the enormous role that emotions have in the life of each individual (Ekman, 2011). In recent decades, several relevant theories have been formed, that include emotional life in their consideration of the issues of human existence (Salovey, 2004). According to the cognitive theory of emotions, the cognitive assessment of the situation in which people find themselves determines the nature of the emotional reaction. Human beings possess a vast repertoire of emotional reactions, the main characteristic of which is the pleasant or unpleasant emotional undertone (positive and negative emotions). Contemporary studies indicate a different effect of positive and negative emotions on cognitive activity (Warren, 2004).

The feeling of social vulnerability, the fear of negative evaluation of others, the fear of being mocked, boredom, dissatisfaction, tension, anger, etc. as well as all other emotional states, have their neurophysiological basis (Cabanac, 2002). Neurobiological mechanisms triggered by unpleasant emotions impede the ability to plan, implement intentions, focus attention, learn and retain information. Under the influence of emotions, people enter a state that neuroscience refers to as cognitive dysfunction. The stronger the emotion, the lesser the cognitive

efficiency is. The more people are occupied by fear, worry, resentment or sadness, the lower the levels of activation of the prefrontal cortex – making it all the more difficult for us to think. Boredom decreases the efficiency of the brain in much the same way – while wandering, thoughts lose their focus and motivation wanes (Damasio, 2002).

Contrary to this, pleasant emotions such as joy, pleasantness, satisfaction, optimism, self-confidence, have an activating effect on “higher”, prefrontal brain regions and stimulate cognitive functions (Buckley & Saarni, 2009). Negative emotions may produce the same effect as they do not cross a certain threshold, i.e. if they are moderate (anger, trembling, anticipation, etc.). When something that represents a challenge for a person happens, attention is focused, the person looks, listens, thinks and therefore learns as well. In interpersonal relationships, positive emotions encourage different behaviours, the purpose of which is to ensure that both sides win, i.e. cooperate and become more tolerant (Fredrickson & Branigan, 2005).

## THE POSSIBILITIES OF IMPLEMENTING GESTALT THERAPY TECHNIQUES IN TEACHING

The psychotherapeutic approach to teaching implies the recognition, acceptance and respect for the actual emotional reactions of the participants in the teaching process, their authentic needs, and the ability to incorporate this understanding and psychological knowledge into the teaching process (Tadić, 2004). The words “therapy” and “therapist”, of course, have a medical connotation and suggest that psychotherapy is developed and shaped exclusively according to the medical model. However, every teacher will have to face the issues regarding the emotional aspect of the teaching process, sooner or later. Therefore, psychotherapy cannot be modelled exclusively according to the medical model, and it is increasingly becoming an interdisciplinary field in which psychology, psychiatry, sociology and pedagogy, as well as other natural and social sciences meet and become integrated (Nevis, 2000). The aim of implementing psychotherapeutic techniques in teaching is not only to stimulate positive emotional reactions and cognitive activity, but also to assist students in getting to know themselves, in finding support within themselves as well as in finding the ability to make the right choices, to assist them in their development towards self-actualization (Milovanović, 2008).

Gestalt therapy is a holistic therapy, the focus of which is on the whole person, with equal respect for cognition and emotions. Gestalt theory and method was developed in 1940 by psychologist Fritz Perls (Perls, 1969). The word *gestalt*

itself is of German origin and signifies the whole. Gestalt therapy is a creative and patient therapy aimed at making us aware of each passing moment of our lives (Zinker, 1977). Its starting point is that which is healthy in people, it helps put their positive emotions in motion, free their creative potentials and develop. The main method of Gestalt therapy is the dialectical method based on the Buberian Me–You contact and dialogue between two people, in which there is a possibility of one person having an influence on the other (Perls et al., 1951). Its main concepts are awareness, contact and emotional experience. These concepts can be applied, not only within the psychotherapeutic relationship, but also in every interpersonal relationship (Sutton et al., 2009). The application makes experience authentic and human relationships *real human* relationships. For these reasons, Gestalt is not only used for therapeutic purposes, but may also be used in other areas. In some Western countries (Great Britain) it is widely used in education (Woldt, 2009). Gestalt therapy is, in fact, nothing more than learning how to govern with one's emotions (Ellis, 1962). This learning has a healing effect, because when one masters their own emotionality, they release their potential. In order to be able to use one's abilities and intelligence, emotions are of paramount importance. People's reactions to stimuli and whether they will realize their abilities, depend on their emotions (Ochsnerand & Gross, 2008).

Gestalt therapy is equipped with numerous and various techniques that can be successfully altered and tailored to given situations (Spagnuolo & Amendt-Lyon, 2003). Some of the techniques are: the technique of dialogue, the technique of unfinished business, the technique of taking responsibility, the rotation technique. Methods, such as the following, can also be used successfully in teaching: guided fantasy, drawings, drama, role play, etc. It is important that all techniques are tailored to certain rules whose basic purpose is to trigger emotional reactions (Woldt, 2008).

## EMOTIONAL ASPECTS OF UNIVERSITY TEACHING

Emotional aspects of university teaching represent a phenomenon that has rarely been studied. Given that contemporary university teaching is facing the problems regarding the motivation of students to actively participate in teaching (Sutton, 2004) and that emotions are a powerful motivational factor which guides behaviour, the current researchers consider the search for the teaching models that would trigger positive emotional reactions and act as motivators to be relevant, especially considering the fact that these issues are rarely dealt with. As a reminder, motivation represents the search for what the person lacks, i.e. the search for a way to meet one's needs (Kort et al., 2002). It is a common concept when it comes to all internal factors, above all emotional ones that consolidate individual

activities, guide behaviour and determine its direction, intensity and duration. Emotions, as key personality components, have an orientation role and represent a significant motivational factor. Contemporary science allows us to understand how negative emotions influence cognitive functioning and offers evidence that they are responsible for many learning difficulties (Oatley and Jenkins, 2003). Therefore, we believe that teachers, in all levels of education, need to take into consideration the emotional aspect of the teaching process and learn how to stimulate positive emotions in their students.

## METHOD

### *Research problem and aim*

The main problem of this research is to examine the emotional effects of implementing Gestalt therapy techniques in teaching students. The main aim of the research is to analyse the emotional reactions of students and identify possible differences between the emotional reactions of students to traditional teaching and their emotional reactions to teaching based on the implementation of Gestalt therapy techniques.

### *Sample*

The research was carried out on a sample of 289 students, future teachers and preschool teachers, with an average age of 20.9 years (134 from the Department for Class Teachers and 155 from the Department for Preschool Teachers). Female students were significantly more numerous than male students and made up 87.41% of the total sample (251 female and 38 male students).

### *Instruments*

The *Questionnaire for the self-assessment of emotional reactions to teaching by Shabot and Shabot (2009)* was used to collect the data on the emotional reactions of students, constructed of items describing emotional reactions related to the six basic categories of emotions (fear, anger, sadness, contempt, surprise and joy). The surveyed students were instructed to use a ten-point scale in providing their response in accordance with their emotional reactions, ranging from weak (score 1) to strong (score 10) emotional reactions. From a total of 18 offered emotional reactions there were three for each basic category of emotions: I have felt: frightened, worried, insecure (fear); anxious, irritable, impatient (anger); disappointed, discouraged, sad (sadness); disinterested, distrustful, bored (contempt); amazed,

astonished, impressed (surprise); satisfied, optimistic, self-confident (joy). Students were also expected to use a ten-point scale to assess their general emotional experience (I have mainly felt “Not very good” or “Very good”), their connection to other participants in the teaching process (I have felt “Not very closely connected to others” or “Very closely connected to others”), their communication with others (My communication with others was “Poor” or “Very good”), as well as their involvement in activity (My involvement in activities was “Low” or “High”).

### *Procedure*

The research design had implied an initial assessment of the emotional reactions of students to traditional, frontal teaching (4 lessons of Psychology and 4 English language lessons), an implementation of Gestalt therapy techniques in teaching (4 lessons of Psychology and 4 English language lessons) and a final assessment of the emotional reactions of students to the implementation of Gestalt therapy techniques in teaching. More precisely, after the four lessons that were realized on the basis of the traditional concept of frontal teaching, the students have provided their responses to the questionnaire (initial assessment). After that, the teaching in the subjects in question was organized by implementing the Gestalt therapy techniques “guided fantasy”, “dialogue” and “role play”. The use of these techniques was adapted to the topic of teaching. After four lessons, organized in this fashion, the students have provided their responses to the questionnaire once more (final assessment). The data on the emotional reactions of students were collected during 2017.

### *Analysis procedures*

The processing of data included methods of descriptive statistics (frequency, mean values), as well as methods of analytical statistics for estimating the significance of differences. The *t-test* was used to test the significance of differences.

## RESULTS

In order to determine the type and intensity of the emotional reactions of students to traditional teaching, an average score was calculated, for each emotion in a certain category, on the basis of their estimates (on a scale from 1 to 10) in the initial assessment (Table 1).

Table 1. Average scores for the emotional reactions of students to traditional teaching (on a scale from 1 to 10)

Category	Emotion	M
Fear	frightened	0.34
	worried	1.29
	insecure	0.78
Anger	anxious	2.58
	irritable	3.79
	impatient	5.78
Sadness	disappointed	0.46
	discouraged	0.34
	sad	0.00
Contempt	disinterested	3.76
	distrustful	0.43
	bored	3.54
Surprise	amazed	0.12
	astonished	0.32
	impressed	0.13
Joy	satisfied	0.45
	optimistic	0.02
	self-confident	0.01

Table 2 shows the ranking list of the categories of emotions in the initial assessment, according to the average scores for the emotional reactions that belong to them.

Table 2. Ranking list of the categories of emotional reactions to traditional teaching

Rank	Category	M
I	Anger	4.05
II	Contempt	2.57
III	Fear	0.80
IV	Sadness	0.26
V	Surprise	0.19
VI	Joy	0.16

In order to determine the type and intensity of emotional reactions of students to teaching organized on the basis of implementing Gestalt therapy techniques, an average score was calculated, for every emotion in a certain category, on the basis of their estimates (on a scale from 1 to 10) in the final assessment (Table 3).

Table 3. Average scores for the emotional reactions of students to the implementation of Gestalt therapy techniques in teaching (on a scale from 1 to 10)

Category	Emotion	M
Fear	Frightened	0.32
	Worried	0.16
	Insecure	0.28
Anger	Anxious	0.26
	Irritable	0.36
	Impatient	0.39
Sadness	Disappointed	0.25
	Discouraged	0.21
	Sad	1.48
Contempt	Disinterested	0.00
	Distrustful	0.21
	Bored	0.00
Surprise	Amazed	4.89
	Astonished	5.47
	Impressed	3.68
Joy	Satisfied	8.69
	Optimistic	6.25
	Self-confident	5.01

Table 4 shows the ranking list of the categories of emotions in the final assessment, according to the average scores for the emotional reactions that belong to them.



Table 4. Ranking list of the categories of emotional reactions to the implementation of Gestalt therapy techniques in teaching

Rank	Category	M
I	Joy	6.65
II	Surprise	4.68
III	Sadnes	0.64
IV	Anger	0.33
V	Fear	0.25
VI	Boredom	0.07

The most significant issue in the context of the aims of this research, was the issue of the existence of differences in the emotional reactions of students to different methods of teaching that were applied in the initial and final assessment. Table 5 shows the results of the *t-test* that was used to analyse the significance of differences between the average scores obtained in the initial and final assessment.

Table 5. Significance of differences between the mean scores regarding the intensity of emotional reactions in the initial and final assessment

Category	Emotion	M (I)	M (F)	t	Sig(2-tailed)
Fear	frightened	0.34	0.32	-1.287	.426
	worried	1.29	0.16	1.763	.001*
	insecure	0.78	0.28	-1.352	.518
Anger	anxious	2.58	0.26	2.631	.000**
	irritable	3.79	0.36	3.579	.000**
	impatient	5.78	0.39	4.215	.000**
Sadness	disappointed	0.46	0.25	-1.072	.129
	discouraged	0.34	0.21	-1.069	.129
	sad	0.00	1.48	1.897	.002*

	disinterested	3.76	0.00	2.123	.000**
Contempt	distrustful	0.43	0.21	-1.365	.476
	bored	3.54	0.00	2.631	.000**
Surprise	amazed	0.12	4.89	3.579	.000**
	astonished	0.32	5.47	4.215	.000**
	impressed	0.13	3.68	2.463	.000**
Joy	satisfied	0.45	8.69	9.235	.000**
	optimistic	0.02	6.25	7.468	.000**
	self-confident	0.01	5.01	4.753	.000**

\* level of significance 0.05

\*\* level of significance 0.01

Table 6 shows the mean values and significance of differences between the reactions of students in the initial and final assessment. The average scores are related to the general emotional experience of students, their connection to others, communication and involvement in activities.

Table 6. Significance of differences between the mean scores regarding the emotional experience, involvement and communication in the initial and final assessment

	M (I)	M (F)	t	Sig(2-tailed)
In an emotional sense, I have felt (from 1–10 not very good – very good)	0.34	8.35	9.763	.000**
I have felt (not connected to others – very connected, from 1- 10)	0.48	5.67	6.135	.000**
My communication with others was (poor –very good, from 1-10)	0.05	6.83	7.468	.000**
My involvement in the activities was (low – high, from 1-10)	1.29	6.68	7.243	.000**

## DISCUSSION

The results of the initial assessment indicate that the surveyed students have reacted to traditional teaching mainly by experiencing negative emotions of moderate intensity. On the ranking list, which was obtained on the basis of the average scores related to the emotional reactions of students, the first place belongs to the emotional reactions in the category of anger (anxiety, irritability, impatience), the second place belongs to the emotional reactions that belong to the category of contempt (disinterest, distrust, boredom), the third place belongs to the emotional reactions in the category of fear (fear, worry, insecurity) and the fourth place belongs to the emotional reactions from the category of sadness (sadness, disappointment, discouragement). The last place belongs to the emotional reactions from the category of surprise (amazement, astonishment, impression) and joy (satisfaction, optimism, self-confidence). In short, the highest average scores, on a scale from 1 to 10, belong to the following emotional reactions: impatience, irritability, disinterest, boredom and anxiety.

The results in the final assessment indicate that the surveyed students have reacted to the teaching organized with the use of Gestalt therapy techniques mainly by experiencing positive emotions of higher intensity. The first place on the ranking list belongs to joy with an average score of 6.65, the second place belongs to surprise with an average score of 4.68 and the third place belongs to sadness with an average score of just 0.64. The end of the list is occupied by anger, fear and boredom, with average scores slightly above zero.

By calculating the significance of differences between the average scores in the initial and final assessment, using the t-test, highly significant differences were determined between the groups of negative and positive emotional reactions. Worry, anxiety, irritability, impatience, disinterest and boredom were statistically highly significantly more often negative emotional reactions to traditional teaching, while positive emotional reactions of amazement, astonishment, impression, satisfaction, optimism and self-confidence were highly significantly more often emotional reactions to teaching organized on the basis of implementing Gestalt therapy techniques.

The obtained and highly significant differences in the mean scores for the general emotional experience, connection with others, communication and involvement in activities, in the initial and final assessment, have confirmed the importance of positive emotional reactions in relation to these aspects of the teaching process. During teaching that was organized on the basis of implementing Gestalt therapy techniques, the students felt highly significantly better than during teaching organized in a traditional manner. Also, the students felt connected with others, they estimated their communication with others as very good and they were, according to their own assessment, involved in the activities.

Starting from the standpoint argued by the representatives of emotional pedagogy, who are demonstrating a new manner of understanding learning and teaching and have more and more supporters, in which the main assumption is that feelings precede learning and that there is a direct connection between the opportunities for learning and the emotional state (Chabot and Chabot 2009), we consider the results obtained in the initial assessment to be worrisome. According to Johnson and associates, anger, fear and sadness are emotions that have the greatest role in the onset of cognitive dysfunction (Johnson and Fredrickson 2005). The emotion of anger, which may vary in intensity and modality, arises as a reaction to frustrations, as a response of people to the prevention of the satisfaction of their motives. Anger is associated with aggression and a tendency to seek change in the behaviour of the other in communication (Milovanović, 2015). In teaching, the recognition of anger and its correlates (anxiety, irritability, impatience) invites teachers to reconsider their own messages, consider the situational context and modify the teaching method. Boredom and disinterest are emotional reactions through which the subject reacts to situations that do not offer him the possibility to satisfy any of his wishes. The purpose of boredom and disinterest is to motivate activity that is aimed at abandoning a situation in which there is no satisfaction or stimulation (Rimé, 2007). Boredom, as well as fear, are considered to be unwanted and harmful emotions in education, and in this sense, recognizing the facial expressions of boredom and fear is invaluable in communicating with students (Rothwell, 2004). Since fear is an innate emotion that arises as a reaction to real or imaginary threats of injury, it blocks cognitive functions and narrows the repertoire of possible reactions to a single one: fleeing a situation that is perceived as threatening. In addition, the physiological processes that represent an integral part of fear may result in the development of psychophysiological disorders. Sadness is an emotion that appears as a reaction to the loss of something important. The facial appearance of sadness transmits the message “I am suffering, I need help”. Recognizing the correlates of suffering, such as sadness, disappointment and discouragement, triggers an empathic reaction in most people and ensures, when it comes to teachers, a reaction that involves compassion and support (Milders et al., 2006). This type of reaction of teachers is priceless, not only in terms of cognitive activity, but also taking into account the significance of support in the prevention of numerous psychopathological phenomena in youth, primarily the prevention of depression and related conditions (Mercer & Littleton, 2007).

The results obtained in the final assessment are encouraging, since pleasure and satisfaction are emotions that usually represent a response to needs being met and wishes being fulfilled. Unlike the negative emotions, that signal danger and narrow the focus by preparing the body to fight or flee, positive emotions signal safety which extends the scope of attention and allows us to see the whole picture

of some occurrence. Because there is a feeling of safety, the tendency to think about alternatives increases, expanding the repertoire of behaviour. Thinking becomes more creative and productive and the number of incentives for action increases and following stress, physiological functions quickly return to a peaceful state (Lyubomirsky et al. 2005). In interpersonal relationships, positive emotions encourage different behaviours, the purpose of which is to ensure that both sides win, i.e. cooperate and become more tolerant (Ainley et. al., 2005). Since positive emotions have a great value in the context of the cognitive activity, their encouragement and support will create a solid foundation for a constructive interaction and communication in the process of education (Adolphs, 2002).

These findings coincide with the findings of other researchers who deal with teaching at the primary school and secondary school age (Manning, 2007). The studies of emotions in teaching, which were conducted by Bognar and associates, have shown that the emotions of fear and boredom dominate teaching, but that it is possible to achieve a domination of pleasant emotions, which are a prerequisite for successful teaching, through a modified approach (Kragulj, 2011). When it comes to university teaching, research that was conducted at various university institutions in Serbia, has shown that fear represents a very dominant emotional reaction in the teaching of the English language (fear of making mistakes and of being negatively evaluated by others), but that applying an innovative model of teaching (integrating the teaching contents and applying affective strategies) can contribute to the ability of students to regulate their own emotions, to improve overall knowledge of language and enhance oral presentations in the English language (Ćirković-Miladinović, 2014a). As a reminder, studies in neuroscience have shown that emotions are broadly related to various cognitive processes such as attention, long-term memory, problem solving, decision-making. Estrada and associates have found that positive emotions increase intrinsic motivation (Estrada et al. 1994). Negative emotions cause attention problems, delayed decision-making latency and a deficit in inductive reasoning (Reed, 1977). In a traditional model of teaching, students who were irritable and bored were not able to learn and think effectively (Goleman, 1995).

Despite its shortcomings (the success of students in learning was not examined), we consider the findings of this research to be relevant, given that they point to a path that should be taken in the search for the models of teaching that trigger positive emotional reactions of students. One example of the innovative teaching model is the integration of the content and affective learning strategies in the English language classroom. This innovative model may enhance the knowledge quality not only in English but to make it possible for students to read texts in English and improve their professional skills, regulate their emotions, influence positively on their own motivation and attitudes towards teaching and

learning (Ćirković-Miladinović, 2014b). Such a new way of university teaching, will have an impact on many generations that will join the school and will improve the overall quality of knowledge and professional development. The teaching models that are new, unusual and avoid routine, trigger emotional reactions that ensure cognitive involvement (Rosiek, 2003). The current researchers also consider that the awareness of the significance, observation and proper interpretation of emotional expressions is the starting point that provides teachers with necessary information about the emotional state of students. The emotional state of students should represent a signpost in search for innovative teaching methods and methods of communication that trigger positive emotional responses which, in turn, enable students to feel safe and therefore involved and cognitively active.

## CONCLUSION

Studies that deal with the emotional aspects of university teaching in our surroundings are extremely rare. The results of this research warn that more attention should be given to this issue. Worrying, anxiety, irritability, impatience, disinterest and boredom are dominant emotional reactions to traditional teaching, while positive emotional reactions of amazement, astonishment, impression, satisfaction, optimism and self-confidence are dominant emotional reactions to teaching organized on the basis of implementing Gestalt therapy techniques. These findings coincide with the findings of researchers whose results show that fear and boredom are dominant emotions in teaching, but also that it is possible to achieve a dominance of pleasant emotions, which are a prerequisite for successful teaching, through a modified approach. Since contemporary neuroscience has shown that emotions are broadly related to various cognitive processes such as attention, long-term memory, problem solving, decision-making, that positive emotions increase motivation and negative emotions cause attention problems, delays in the decision-making latency and a deficit in inductive reasoning, the findings of this research point to the path that should be taken in search for the models of teaching that trigger positive emotional reactions, prevent cognitive dysfunction and trigger intrinsic motivation.

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