

***Harnessing the Unspeakable: Effect of Using Creative Methodological Tools to Speak About Emotions in Higher Education***

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**Abstract**

In recent years, emotionality studies and emotional burnout has gained interest among researcher, especially while trying to understand emotions in the workplace. Many people are reluctant to share their true emotions or, in some instances, are unaware of the emotions they constantly feel while encountering difficult situations. Individuals are expected to ‘swallow’ their feelings in the workplace and only show positive emotions when faced with challenges. Ultimately, the notion of unspeakable emotions is unconsciously immersed into their practice. Consequently, this ethnographic study will explore faculty members’ day to day life situations in higher education, their emotional experiences, both negative and positive, and their physical environment. The process of helping faculty members speak about emotions involves three phases adopted from the phenomenological approaches to emotions. During the first phase, participants are asked to talk about their experiences using metaphors which helped them reflect on their emotional experiences. In the second phase, semi-structured interviews are conducted to understand their day-to-day practice. Lastly, during the third phase, participants are provided with images of the BLOB tree which helped them reflect on their emotional responses and occupational practice. This discussion is motivated by a desire to understand true emotional responses as experienced by the individual. The emphasis on understanding the daily lived experiences and emotions in higher education opens possibilities for providing better care and acknowledgment to both teachers and students. The findings show that creative methods in emotionality study yielded more emotionally charged responses from the participants.

Keywords: Emotional Burnout, Emotional Labour, Phenomenology

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## **Introduction**

Although the topic of emotion is gaining more recognition in Higher Education, most of the literature in this area has been concerned with the cognitive aspect of teaching (Butler, 2004; Cohen, 2011). The role of teachers' emotions and wellbeing in relation to the contextual practice seems to be gaining in recent years. There has been a growing body of literature in understanding the lived experiences and emotional responses of teachers (Kitching, 2009; Zembylas, 2011). Generally, people are more likely to refrain from speaking about emotions and feelings especially at their workplace. Previous research on teacher's emotionality has mainly explored negative emotions associated with teaching, guilt (Thomas, 2017), stress (Harmsen et al., 2018; Yin et al., 2019), fear (Mehmood, 2019), and anger (Frenzel et al., 2016). Few research studies examined how instructors in higher education feel in relation to the work environment (Mendzheritskaya & Hansen, 2019). The current study does not aim to examine emotions from a psychological, neurobiological, nor a clinical perspective, However, this qualitative study is more concerned with understanding the different ways to help teachers speak about emotions in HE besides exploring different factors that are more likely to contribute to their lived experiences.

## **Literature Review**

Ultimately, speaking about felt emotions is a challenging task, especially during interviews. In their mixed- method study of emotions among pre-tenure faculty members, Stupnisky, Hall, and Pekrun (2019) examined the relationship between faculty members' emotions and their teaching and research performance. The authors interviewed 11 faculty members and surveyed 102 others and identified 46 discrete emotions in relation to both research and teaching. The study highlights the importance of reflection on the role of emotions in higher education as a predictive measure of teaching and research performance of teachers. Accordingly, there is a dire need to acknowledge the individual feelings of faculty members in Higher Education to offer implications for faculty development. In their dual study of students' disruptive behaviour and its impact on teachers' occupational wellbeing, De Ruiter, et al., (2020) tested teachers' emotional responses in relation to specific classroom events themselves and the perceived history of the students' disruptive behavior. Their aim was to understand whether teachers' perceptions of the students' past disruptive behavior moderated teachers' valence appraisals (if the event was positive or negative) and teachers' emotions in response to a particular event. There were 218 teachers who took part in their first study in which one event was examined with the relevant students. In their second study, 37 teachers took part and multiple events were examined. Both studies concluded that teachers expressed negative emotions towards students they perceived as more disruptive in the past compared with students they perceived as less disruptive. the study also found that anger was the only emotion associated with teachers' occupational wellbeing. The findings are consistent with the current study in terms of the theoretical stance of emotions. Emotions in education is deemed crucial to pedagogical practices (Zembylas, 2011). Researchers to date utilized different creative methods to help participants speak about emotions. MIyanarzyk (2014) examined the effects of storytelling to bridge the gap between students' previous experiences and the type of structure expected from them by many college courses. In her study, she suggested that storytelling strategies in the writing classroom allow students to strengthen their communication skills and engage emotionally with the activities. Similarly, in her qualitative study, Gómez Palacio (2010) implemented storytelling, role play, and information gap activities which helped students improve their speaking skills and participation in class.

Accordingly, the Blob-tree tools used in this study help participants express themselves appropriately and use the conversations learned in their daily lives.

### **Research into Workplace Emotional Responses**

Daily demands of the work environment are more likely to act as stressors to faculty members which could in later stages lead to strain (Abenavoli, 2013; Woods & Carlyle 2003). For that reason, it becomes essential to understand the demands imposed on faculty members to understand their emotional responses to their contextual practice. Emotional burnout and lived experiences have been widely researched and it becomes the cause of concern especially in the field of education and faculty well-being (Greenfield, 2015; Kyriacou, 2011). Ultimately, it becomes essential to understand the small little things that impinge on teachers in the workplace. Drawing on Bandura's (1999) call for small life occurrences, people's lives are shaped by the incidental series of events that they encounter throughout the course of their day. To some extent, some of the critical life decisions we make rely on the insignificant little events that happen to us. Accordingly, the minor events we encounter, most likely at work, can have a crucial influence on our experiences and the way we feel, most specifically, our motivation to work. Several researchers distinguish between emotions felt in the workplace and cognition in which emotionality is often associated with irrationality. According to Sutton & Wheatley (2003) expressing emotions in the workplace is more likely to be considered "destructive, primitive, and childish, rather than thoughtful, civilized, and adult" (p. 328). It seems that this approach isolates the mind from the heart and emphasizes only on the physiological aspects of emotions without any references to cognition or thinking (Marom & Tarrasch, 2015). On the contrary and in line with this study, Wells and Claxton (2002) suggest that emotional experiences and responses are determined by social interaction with others. Ultimately, the current study is informed by the social constructionist approach to emotions which perceives emotions as socially interactive and constructed by human interaction.

### **Definition and Classification of Emotions**

It is rather difficult to pin down one definition of emotion due to the superfluity of definitions available in the literature (Chen, 2016). Heretofore, there was still not one agreed upon definition of emotion among researchers which created confusion in the field (Reisenzein, 2007). Social constructionism approaches to emotions suggests that teachers' emotional responses are more likely to be derived from power relations are socially constructed by the social and political contexts of the participants. In that case, emotions are molded by social constructionism in which they are mainly shaped by society and culture (Aranguren, 2017). Therefore, the approach to emotion in this study is informed by Averill's (1985) full definition which states that an emotion "is a transitory social role, a socially constituted syndrome, that includes an individual's appraisal of the situation and that is interpreted as a passion rather than as an action." (P. 312). In his definition, Averill (1985) emphasises that the individuals' appraisal of a situation and their interpretation is what constitutes emotions. In the same vein, Zembylas (2003) considers emotions as not only an innate disposition but also political and social phenomena that are constructed by the individual's own work. This socially constructed view of theorising emotions is a fundamental part in any professional context, and in this case, higher education. Accordingly, emotions are inevitably viewed as the individual's response to political, cultural, and social practices. In most cases, venting out emotionally especially in the workplace is often stigmatized, and an employee who is always emotional is more likely to come across as inadequate and unprofessional.

## **Methodology**

### **Current Study Design**

The aim of the present paper is to gain a deeper understanding of teachers' emotional responses using the Blob-tree creative methodological tool. Consequently, this ethnographic study explores faculty members' day to day life situation, their emotional experiences, both negative and positive, and their physical environment. The field of ethnography originated from anthropology as a way to account for social lives and cultures and means "the study of people" (Howell, 2013, p. 120); *ethnos*, in Greek, means 'people,' and *graphy* entails studying a particular phenomenon. In that sense, ethnography emphasises the study of culture, language, and the interaction of members in that specific culture (Creswell, 2013). According to Hammersley and Atkinson (2005), ethnographic research design has become popular in social research as an opposition to the positivist research approach. In the long history of ethnography, it has acquired many different definitions. Hammersley and Atkinson (2005) define ethnography as a field that entails the "ethnographer participating, overtly or covertly, in people's daily lives for an extended period of time, watching what happens, listening to what is said, asking questions – in fact, collecting whatever data are available to throw light on the issues that are the focus of the research" (p. 1). This definition has been adopted in this study, since the main aim is to have a close approximation with the participants through participant and non-participant observation, which are the main tools used in this research, in an effort to arrive at a full understanding of teachers' experiences, culture, and emotionality. In doing ethnography, the researcher develops an understanding of people's actions by observing them in their own communities and environments in order to interpret their values, beliefs, and ways of living (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2005).

### **Philosophical Stance**

The current study adopts an interpretive framework, which aims at understanding people's realities from their own perspective and acknowledges that people's realities differ based on their subjective experiences (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2017). Interpretivism does not hold a rigid way to seek answers for their questions, however, it's an approach to explore reality from the perspective of their subjects. This anti-positivist approach suggests that research is approached subjectively from the inside; through individuals' direct experiences rather than being objectively approached from the outside (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2017). Most theories constructed under the interpretivist paradigm draw between the inside-outside, so those who are in the same setting may experience the social reality in a different way (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2017). However, interpretivism has been criticised for subjectivity, which plays a major role in interpretivist research where the researcher can become greatly biased during the interpretation of data (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2017). This philosophical stance is evident in studies of emotions based on a relativist ontology. Willis (2007) argues that individuals act in certain ways and are influenced by their environments. The meaning of the world according to the person is a crucial aspect in understanding a particular phenomenon. The interpretivist framework provides the context to explore teachers' interpretations of their own experiences in higher education. The aim of interpretivist research is in line with the current study objective since it aims to understand a particular phenomenon rather than explain it. Semi-structured interviews and creative methodological sessions are utilised in the study to better understand the challenges and stresses that faculty members encounter during their course of study and allow the

interviewer an opportunity to view the phenomenon from the interviewer’s standpoint (Bryman, 2015).

### **Selection and Sampling**

A sample of eight faculty members in higher education, randomly selected, took part in the study. Due to the density of the data generated and the nature of the ethnographic study, a small sample size was deemed appropriate. The following table presents the study sample demographics.

*Table 1: Demonstration of the study sample demographics*

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>University</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Overall teaching years</b>	<b>Years of experience</b>	<b>Marital Status</b>	<b>Children</b>
<b>Rawan</b>	Baa	45	26	11	Married	3 daughters
<b>Maya</b>	Lam	NP	9	NP	NP	NP
<b>Nuha</b>	Meem	NP	15	5	Widow	2 sons
<b>Faten</b>	Meem	52	15	19	Married	4 children
<b>Hayfaa</b>	Lam	NP	10	10	Married	triplets
<b>Nabil</b>	Aleph	45	26	12	Married	6 children
<b>Nabila</b>	Dal	39	15	9	Married	2 children
<b>Ghazi</b>	Jeem	NA	22	12	Married	NA

### **Data collection Procedures**

Ethnography uses a ‘toolbox’ of methods to extract data from the setting. In this study, elements of phenomenology were utilised to generate data related to participants’ emotional responses. Edmund Husserl in 1900 is the founding father of the philosophy of phenomenology which is regarded as the positivist approach in qualitative research due to its systematic approach. Husserl’s philosophy emerged as a criticism to the field of psychology that aims to relate human issues to natural sciences as individuals do not react to stimuli spontaneously (Shahabi & Rassi, 2015). Seidman (2013) suggests the phenomenological interviewing which is comprised of three- interview series, to help the researcher delve deeper into the area being studied and to establish rapport and trust with the participant. In this study, the first interview establishes the context of the participant's experience and builds rapport. I have used the metaphorical imagery with the participants in which they were asked to find an image that symbolizes their experience in teaching. Semi-structured interviews were utilized during the second interview which allow participants to recreate the details of their experience within the context in which it occurred. During the third and final interview, the Blob-tree tools were utilized and since rapport was established at this stage, participants reflected on the meaning of the experience and generated emotionally charged data.

The Blob tree (See Image 1) was mainly used in this study to help participants articulate their emotions and reflect on their experiences in higher education. The Blob Tree was created in the early 1980s by Pip Wilson and Ian Long to communicate with individuals who found reading difficult; it is a no-word tool, relying instead on expressions and figures (Wilson & Long, 2010).

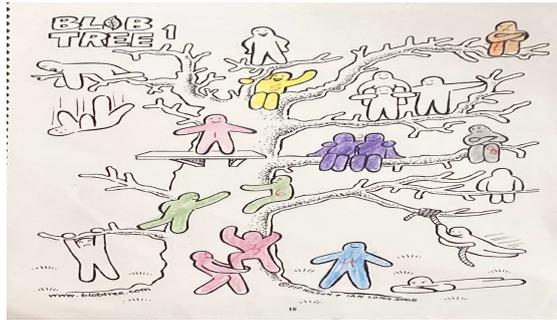


Image (1): Example of a Blob Tree tool

### Data Analysis Procedures

Interviews were recorded and transcribed. The Blob-Tree transcripts that were conducted during the third interview session were collected and analysed. The Blob-tree sessions were mainly conducted to help faculty members speak about their emotions in depth. The objective behind using the tools was to arrive at an in-depth understanding of faculty members' experiences in Higher Education. According to Lester, Cho, and Lochmiller (2020) interpretation of one's data is as much art as science. It is a process, much like writing, that is both invisible and difficult to describe. There are no set procedures to follow and no "right" way to analyze the data. Accordingly, I have only used the word document to analyse and interpret data. As I was sketching possible codes, I found myself drawing a spiral maze, *Labyrinth*, around the participants, with one exit route and many obstacles and probably triumphs paths. Image (2) demonstrates an example of the *Labyrinth* developed for each participant. The center of the Labyrinth signifies the felt emotion and the code generated from the Blob-tree session, and moving outwards are the social factors impinging on the emotion. The exit path from the spiral maze is the coping strategy used by the faculty member.

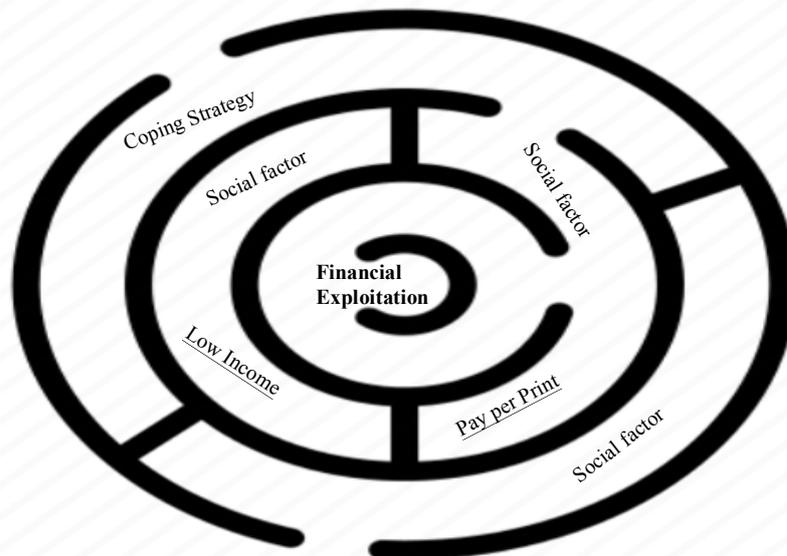


Image (2): The Labyrinth which includes the codes that emerged from each participant

I drew on this metaphor of labyrinth to understand the messiness and complexity of the data which helped me conceptualize the daily lived experiences of the participants. This visualization in fact concludes that the codes, categories and themes generated were actually

emotional responses that were impinging on and shaped the daily lived experiences of faculty members in higher education.

## Findings

The present study investigated the emotional responses of faculty members in higher education. Teachers were asked to reflect on their daily lived experiences in higher education. During the first interview series, teachers found it difficult to find metaphorical imagery to symbolize their experience. However, the photos they selected helped establish the context of their experience. The analyzed data revealed that the participants elaborated more on their experiences during the Blob sessions and their discourse was more emotionally charged than the semi-structured interview session. It seems that photo elicitation techniques generate a different kind of information as it evokes feelings, memories, and in-depth information (Harper, 2002). Table For example, Table 2 demonstrates the difference in the discourse between data generated during the semi-structured interview session and the Blob-tree session in relation to *financial burden* code.

Table 2: Demonstration of the code Financial Burden

Data	Data Source	Code
I [had to] get [my own] new printer, even [...] the ink [because] I often, daily, [print] worksheets for them. [...] I print my [own] exams, my quizzes. [...] I do this because I want to do it.	Semi-structured interview	Financial Burden
This is me holding to the tree. I feel that the school is mine, everything there is mine. I don't need anyone or anything. I bought everything. Sometimes I feel I am trapped in the school; I get angry or maybe sad to spend all that money.	Blob Tree	Financial Burden

The table above clearly shows the discrepancy between both data sets. Participants were reluctant to reflect on their true emotions during the semi-structured interview sessions. It is also possible that some participants find it difficult to express their emotions during formal interviews. Visual methods enabled me to engage the participants in somewhat uncomfortable conversations about emotions and teaching. Ultimately, participants found it also easier to speak about their true emotions in relation to their relationship with management during the Blob-tree sessions. Table 3 below demonstrates the difference in the discourse between data generated during the semi-structured interview session and the Blob-tree session in relation to *Interpersonal relationships with others* code.

*Table 3: Demonstration of the code Interpersonal relationships with other*

<b>Data</b>	<b>Data Source</b>	<b>Code</b>
I I feel that I am somewhat happy with management yeah, they care for us, support it, [they are] so tough like they won't upset us much	Semi-structured interview	Interpersonal relationships with others
I am that Blob frowning. Sometimes I run to the toilets and cry, our head of department will not care if you are overloaded, maybe communication is a problem as well. I am [frowning] because I have no control over the classes I want to teach.	Blob Tree	Interpersonal relationships with others

The table above represents two data sets generated by the same participant. All participants in the study did not want to reveal negative emotions about their superiors. Speaking openly about emotions is not an easy task and requires multiple encounters with the participant to be able to speak about private and intimate feelings. Conversely, using creative methodological tools like the Blob Tree method proved to be successful to make participants connect with their emotions and produce emotionally charged sentences. Table 4 also demonstrates the different data in both settings.

*Table 4: Demonstration of the code Physical Environment*

<b>Data</b>	<b>Data Source</b>	<b>Code</b>
The university is my second home, I can't tell you which part I like the most, but I feel [that] I miss it when I go away on holidays.	Semi-structured interview	Physical Environment
I am this [Blob with a sad face] because you know sometimes I feel that I deserve that classroom conditions become better, I like to have a nice office the one I have is without even a window.	Blob Tree	Physical Environment

The study's participants also commented on the lack of appreciation at the workplace. The discrepancy in the data generated is consistent with all eight participants and throughout all the codes and themes. The findings of the study suggests that visual methods and creative methodological tools are recommended for research into emotional responses and lived experiences especially in one's workplace, since individuals are more likely to fear exposure of their real thoughts and feelings to upper management.

## **Discussion**

The current study offers a way of examining the creative tools in educational research as an effective method to speak about emotions. The use of visual methods has recently become

popular in different ethnographic studies (Russell, 2007; Thomson, 2008). Russell (2007) suggests that careful consideration needs to be given to utilising visual methods in school ethnographies. The use of visual methods has been criticised by social scientists as ambiguous and open to subjective and biased interpretations (Frith, Riley, Archer, & Gleeson, 2005). Similarly, the naturalistic approach that emphasises objectivity in observing participants' situations and interactions regards the use of images in qualitative research as an unreliable source of inquiry (Russell, 2007). According to Pink (2007), the implementation of visual ethnography requires the researcher to be well-equipped and to expect that throughout the study, new visual methods may be deemed crucial to utilise. The use of creative methods can encourage conversation and may be deemed useful during interviews (Russell, 2007). The use of creative data collection tool helps in establishing a rapport with the participants and eliciting more thoughts and information that would be missed with informal or formal interviews.

## **Conclusion**

In most ethnographic research, the events in naturalistic settings are difficult to be reproduced and the findings are only applicable to that group understudy, unlike controlled settings where researchers can control research variables (Nurani, 2008). In that sense, the aim of this study is not to generalise the findings to a wider population but only to understand the factors that contribute to the emotionality and experiences faculty members in higher education who share some characteristics. This limitation can be minimized by utilising triangulation to ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the constructs used in the study. Despite the limitations of the ethnographic study, a major advantage of the study is to record participants' behaviour and emotional responses as it occurs in the natural setting, provides a holistic description of the phenomenon within the community, and to understand the phenomena understudy from the perspective of the participants (Nurani, 2008).

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