

*Using Literature for Emotional Literacy Education: A Review and Proposal for  
Hong Kong Universities*

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**Abstract**

*Emotional Intelligence* (Goleman, 1995) has been credited for bringing the importance of emotional intelligence (and emotional literacy, which refers to different qualities although they are often used interchangeably) to the attention of international layman readers. Although the exact abilities and aptitudes included in emotional intelligence (or literacy) vary with different scholars, it may be construed as the repertoire of emotional competencies and skills available to an individual at a given point in time, for coping with the environmental demands and constraints, as Matthews, Zeidner, and Roberts state in their *Emotional Intelligence: Science and Myth* (2002). If these competencies and skills are so essential to a human being's overall health and quality of life, where and when do we acquire these skills? An obvious answer will be through the formal education system, which makes sure that under normal circumstances, a student will acquire the basic necessary skills for survival in our society. Yet in Hong Kong, despite its having a highly competitive compulsory education system, emotional literacy is not a part of the formal education system at any level from primary to secondary and tertiary education. This presentation is an attempt to review the education of emotions among Hong Kong universities, and to make suggestions about how the education of emotions can be incorporated into the formal curriculum in university. More specifically a proposal will be made to use literature and film as the core texts to construct a learning experience for university students through general education.

Keywords: Emotional Literacy Education, Hong Kong Universities, Literature and Film

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## **Introduction**

Emotional intelligence was tentatively proposed as a new intelligence in 1990, suggesting that "some individuals possess the ability to reason about and use emotions to enhance thought more effectively than others" (Mayer, Salovey, & Caruso, 2008, p.503). This proposed new intelligence gave rise to a lot of discussions and started numerous researches, which today has already grown into a well-established research area. For laymen, Daniel Goleman's book of the same title in 1995 popularizes this concept and makes the general public think about the importance of this supposedly new found intelligence. At the end of his book *Emotional Intelligence* (1995), Goleman reiterated the need to foster this new ability in our society: "Empathy, as we have seen, leads to caring, altruism, and compassion. Seeing things from another's perspective breaks down biased stereotypes, and so breeds tolerance and acceptance of differences. These capacities are ever more called on in our increasingly pluralistic society, allowing people to live together in mutual respect and creating the possibility of productive public discourse" (p. 285).

Since Goleman's appeal made 20 years ago, the concept of Emotional Intelligence has appeared in different forms in formal and informal curriculum across different education systems. Although today there are still different approaches to its understanding academically, the existence in human beings of a set of abilities besides those of cognitive abilities, and that they play a significant role in the success of a person, e.g. competence in handling emotions, in establishing successful and positive relationships, in regulating one's goals and feelings, etc., is generally recognized in our society. With this general recognition comes the urge to find ways to develop this ability through education, and in the two decades since Mayer and Salovey's initial proposal (1997) we have seen a lot of educational programmes for students of various levels in American schools, and attempts to offer such programmes in other education systems. As an academic working in the Arts Faculty in a Hong Kong university, I share the belief in Emotional Intelligence's role in enabling a person to lead a successful life, and that the teaching of emotional intelligence should form part of the official curriculum. This paper includes a brief review of discussions about Emotional Intelligence, some justifications of its promotion in the formal curriculum, some observations concerning emotional intelligence teaching in the Hong Kong context, and a simple proposal to use literary and film narratives in the university classroom to teach emotional intelligence as an integrated experience.

## **Defining Emotional Intelligence (EI)**

When it was first proposed to be a new intelligence, an initial working description of EI was:

Emotional intelligence concerns the ability to carry out accurate reasoning about emotions and the ability to use emotions and emotional knowledge to enhance thought (Mayer, Roberts, & Barsade, 2008, p. 511).

After more than 20 years of research and discussion, new definitions and approaches to its understanding and evaluation have been proposed. Here I will summarize a review written by researchers in this area in 2008 to give a general picture of the key approaches to EI. According to Mayer, Roberts and Barsade (2008), there are three main approaches to emotional intelligence in the scientific literature: 1. Specific Ability approaches, 2. Integrative-model approaches, and 3. Mixed-model approach.

1. Specific-ability approaches to emotional intelligence see EI as a particular skill or set of skills, e.g. accuracy in emotional perception, ability to read emotional expressions, which can facilitate thinking. Scholars taking these approaches believe that a person's emotional response to important issues may help in making the right decision, or knowing when to include or exclude emotions in making a decision is an important factor in thinking. Also included in this model is the concept of reasoning about emotions. If one can describe an emotion accurately and be able to match a consequence related to having a particular emotion, it can help to formulate guidelines about how to respond to specific situations. Finally, emotional management (self and other) can be a very useful result of having the knowledge to perceive, identify, describe, and reason about emotions. What we usually refer to as positive thinking, or alternative thinking, is a strategy to manage emotions.

2. Integrative-model approaches tend to "join several specific abilities to obtain an overall sense of EI" (p. 513). A representative model of this group of approaches is Mayer and Salovey's revised definition of emotional intelligence, which is "the ability to perceive emotions, to access and generate emotions so as to assist thought, to understand emotions and emotional knowledge, and to reflectively regulate emotions so as to promote emotional and intellectual growth" (Mayer & Salovey, 1997, p. 5). We can see that emotional intelligence is an integration of abilities from 4 areas: i) accurately perceiving emotion, ii) using emotions to facilitate thought, iii) understanding emotion, iv) managing

emotion. Each branch of EI in this model has its relevant test instruments, which together form the MSCEIT (Mayer-Salovey-Caruso Emotional Intelligence Test) (Mayer, Salovey, & Caruso, 2002).

3. Mixed-model approaches target more mixed qualities relating to emotions and have a generally broader interpretation of what EI includes. For example, it includes general abilities about emotions such as "noncognitive capability, competency, or skill", and/or "emotionally and socially intelligent behaviour", and "dispositions from the personality domain". The main difference between these mixed models approach and the two previous approaches is the inclusion of both individual abilities as well as more general descriptions of personality traits such as "adaptability, (low) impulsiveness, and social competence, creative thinking, flexibility" etc. (p. 514). Mayer, Roberts and Barsade felt that this approach lacks a primary focus in terms of defining what emotional intelligence is.

The first two approaches are better established because together with a clearer focus, relevant and specific tests/instruments have also been designed to evaluate the abilities identified and how they work together. While research and related theoretical development is still on-going, that emotional intelligence is an important factor which plays a part in maintaining mental well-being, as well as in directly and indirectly helping to achieve success in the practical aspects of life is generally considered a valid argument. In 1994, Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) was founded in the States in response to the educational needs of positive youth development. From its webpage, it is:

the nation's leading organization advancing the development of academic, social and emotional competence for all students. Our mission is to help make evidence-based social and emotional learning (SEL) an integral part of education from preschool through high school. Through research, practice and policy, CASEL collaborates to ensure all students become knowledgeable, responsible, caring and contributing members of society.

Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) program, is:

the process through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and

maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions.  
(<http://www.casel.org/social-and-emotional-learning/>)

UK had also adopted similar approach to emotional education since the 2000s, through a top-down initiative called the Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning (SEAL) Programme. When the new government took office in 2010, SEAL went through a major review and was phased out, to be replaced by a more flexible and independent approach by individual schools and institutions. The efforts in these other nations, and much of the results of these efforts, have been encouraging about the effects of including the teaching of emotional intelligence within the formal education system.

### **SEL Programmes in other countries and some reflections about their success**

The support for SEL programmes comes from attempts to understand the problems students are having: bullying, violence in schools, problems of adjustment, motivation in studying, risk to substance reliance, personal relationships, etc. These problems, which are not academic by themselves, very often cumulated in poor academic performance, simply because they do not create a suitable mental and emotional environment for learning. "Learning may be promoted by emotional skills said to include higher motivation, self-control, and effective self-regulation, along with social skills such as forming constructive learning partnerships and avoidance of damaging antisocial behaviors. EI has been claimed to be directly predictive of student success, as well as indirectly mediating success by protecting student from barriers to learning such as mental distress, substance abuse, delinquency, teen pregnancy, and violence" (as cited in Zeidner, Roberts, & Matthews, 2009, p. 228).

Thus, Zeidner et al. supported the revamping of school curriculum and classroom procedures to improve learning. In their book *What We Know About Emotional Intelligence: How It Affects Learning, Work, Relationships, and Our Mental Health*, they stated that "[a]s has been demonstrated by extensive research one of the many correlates of classroom bullying and antisocial behaviour is the lack of empathic and self-regulatory skills (Olweus, 2001). In fact, social and emotional education has been coined the 'missing piece' in school life - that part of a school's mission that, while always close to the thoughts of many teachers, somehow eluded them (Elias et al., 1997)" (Zeidner et al., 2009, p. 231).

By 2009, CASEL had reported that more than 150 social and emotional intervention

programs were in operation across USA schools, under different names such as "life skills training", "self-science", "education for care", "social awareness", "social problem solving", "social competency", and "creative conflict resolution" (Zeidner et al., 2009, p.234). These programmes take different forms, some are standalone lessons, some are integrated into already existing lessons of various disciplines being taught at the school. Zeidner et al. suggested that "curriculum-based emotional learning comes naturally with many of the liberal arts. For example, children can learn much about various feelings when reading literary works that depict characters with the tendency to experience specific emotions (e.g. sadness). Children can observe how characters express and display their emotions, what makes the character feel as they do, how the characters cope in response to their feelings, and how effective are the various methods of coping employed. This form of affective learning proceeds throughout the educational system, and as the literary or artistic scenarios become more complex, so does emotional learning seeking to promote the development of social and emotional competencies" (Zeidner et al., 2009, p.233).

In their book, Zeidner et al. reported a brief review of selected social-emotional learning intervention programmes. Without going into details, it suffices to say here that generally they are felt to have helped in the purposes they were designed for, although most of them do not have a clear focus on emotional intelligence education. Whatever their designed purposes have been, some common observations about these programmes have been that these social-emotional skills are 1. teachable, 2. positively related to academic results, and that 3. caring relationships form the foundations of genuine and enduring learning in schools.

From their findings after evaluating a selected number of these programmes, Zeidner et al. made some suggestions about the development and evaluation of social and emotional learning programmes (p.245-249):

1. EI intervention programs should be based on a solid conceptual framework (solid theoretical framework, clear definition of EI, coherent rationale for program objectives and methods for achieving them);
2. Program goals and behavioral outcomes should be specific (in my University now, we adopt the outcomes-based teaching and learning (OBTL) approach);
3. The educational, social-cultural, and developmental context for program implementation (age of students, staff abilities, learning environment) should be identified;

4. EI programs should be fully integrated into the school educational and instructional curriculum, (not taught as add-ons) "accordingly an emerging strategy in this framework is not to create a special class for teaching emotional skills but to complement regular academic subjects by blending lessons on emotions with other topics (e.g. arts, health, or science). Thus students can learn how to harness emotions in gym; how to handle stress, anxiety, or frustration in math class; or how to empathize with another's plight when reading powerful literature (Salovey et al., 1999)" (p.247);
5. Practice and generalization of the domain of emotional skills across different classes of behavioral performance should be planned;
6. Professional development of program personnel should be facilitated;
7. Robust experimental designs for assessing program effectiveness and valid and reliable assessments.

As I am proposing to incorporate the teaching of emotional intelligence into regular teaching in my own disciplines, the highlighted points have direct relevance in facilitating better coursework design.

### **Justifications for having a more curriculum-based EI programme in Hong Kong**

Although HK boasts of a very competitive and comprehensive education system, emotional education is not a component of the formal education, and it is not difficult to understand why when we look at how tightly packed even a 5-year-old child's timetable is. Besides the official kindergarten sessions from 9 am to 12:30 pm Monday to Friday, my niece Louise has piano class, Mandarin class, poetry recital class, English language class, ice-skating class, ballet class, and Djembe class in the afternoon over the week. She will enter primary one next September. That is generally considered as the beginning of official curriculum in HK, therefore it can be expected that her timetable will be even more packed than now (gone will be the occasional slots for afternoon nap). The school timetable will extend from early morning to at least the middle of the afternoon, and any time available will be given to academic subjects which "matter" when public examinations or getting to a good university is concerned. Emotional education, at least in the form practiced as SEL, is not considered the first priority in the HK education system.

But the value of education of the emotions to children and teenagers has been shown in numerous evaluation exercises. I quoted from Zeidner et al. and their brief report on the generally positive results of SEL type programmes in the States. I also noted

reports of specific researches conducted on different sample groups of university students concerning the connection between what would loosely be regarded as emotional intelligence (Parker, Summerfeldt, Hogan, & Majeski, 2004, p. 164) and academic performance of those individuals. These previous researches yielded contradictory results, as some indicated only a "modest

" connection between the two factors, and some found "little association" between academic performance and emotional intelligence. While the weak connection between these two factors in the previous research findings may have to do with the design of the researches (too mixed student background, different years of study put together, etc.), Parker et al. reported their study which was designed to focus specifically on the correlation between emotional intelligence and academic success. The sample was a group of 372 first year full-time university students at a small Ontario university, and "results of the present study suggest quite strongly that intrapersonal, adaptability, and stress management abilities are important factors in the successful transition from high school to university" (Parker et al., 2004, p. 170).

David W Chan's paper "Emotional Intelligence: Implications for educational practice in schools" (2002) has reviewed the programme of SEL as practiced in USA, and based on the success of SEL, he proposed that "[t]he framework however can also be regarded as a resource for the development of integrated and comprehensive school-based programs intended to enhanced students' emotional intelligence and their whole-person development in Hong Kong schools. Ultimately, the development, implementation, and evaluation of such programs should hopefully lead to an enhanced understanding of education reform that goes beyond the effective management of schools and the standards used to measure students' academic achievement to include the creation of learning environments that optimize the whole-person development of students" (Chan, 2002, p. 193).

In a research he did with a group of gifted students in HK, Chan also noted a connection between the different aspects of the participants' EI and the strategies they have adopted to cope with their special status of giftedness. "Thus, the findings that specific social coping strategies were predictable from specific components of emotional intelligence have implications for the provision of preventive interventions and the development of counseling service for gifted students in HK" (Chan, 2003, p. 416). This connection between components of EI and resulting behavior has implications not only for offering an all-round education environment for gifted students, but also a rationale for provision of whole-person education to all students.

Having looked through some of the literature about the success of the emotional intelligence education programmes on students' academic performance, on their emotional and mental well-being in other countries, I support Chan's appeal to develop a school-based whole-person education programme with some emphasis on the teaching of emotional knowledge and intelligence starting from the school level. Interestingly, universities in Hong Kong embrace the ethos of whole-person development in their curriculum and co-curricular design. As a faculty teaching in a Humanities department, I am well aware of the value of whole-person education, especially the part played by emotional intelligence. Having made my case in support of such a programme in the formal education system, in the rest of my paper, I will briefly review the course offerings at university level, and hope to share some preliminary ideas in incorporating the teaching of emotional intelligence in the regular disciplinary teaching.

### **Emotional intelligence related courses offered by universities in Hong Kong**

Here is a brief review of the current course offerings by universities in Hong Kong. Courses that cover some aspects of knowledge of our emotions are offered in the Social Science Faculty, Psychology Department, usually about maintaining healthy interpersonal relationships, healthy lifestyle; or relating to educational psychology. There are also a small number of courses related to emotional literacy offered as part of the general education programme, open to all students no matter what discipline they major in.

Among the 9 major institutions offering undergraduate degree programmes in Hong Kong, 7 institutions offer a total of 8 degree programmes in Psychology.

- HKU has a degree in Psychology, and a course entitled [PSYC2070/PSYC0070 Love, marriage, sex, and family] which covers intimate relationships and implications of their decisions in that respect.  
([http://www.psychology.hku.hk/index.php?rpath=all\\_courses\\_1011](http://www.psychology.hku.hk/index.php?rpath=all_courses_1011))
- CUHK also has an undergraduate degree in Psychology, and there is a course entitled [PSYC1030 Psychology of personal growth] which covers topics such as "developing adaptive social behaviour and effective coping skills", and "interpersonal communication, stress ad coping" etc. [PSYC1070 Healthy body healthy mind] introduces the "7-well stress management approach"; [PSYC1630 Communication for healthy relationship] covers "both conceptual and practical issues in interpersonal communication"; [PSYC3450 Problem solving]

“introduces cognitive and social approaches to problems solving, including ways in which creativity, intelligence, EQ, and interpersonal sensitivity affect the kinds of problems to be solved and the manner in which they are solved.” [PSYC 3660 Emotion and motivation] “discusses the theories and empirical findings on emotions and other related topics....Students will learn how emotions influence the ways we think and behave, the situations we seek, and the ways we make sense of our lives.” (I think this is the closest to emotional intelligence teaching.) (<http://www.psy.cuhk.edu.hk/index.php/en/studies/prospective-students/53-studies/prospective-students/undergraduate-programme/308-course-information>)

- HKUST offers no psychology degree, but has [SOSC1980 Psychology and everyday life] which covers issues encountered by young people "during transition to adulthood". ([http://www.sosc.ust.hk/teaching\\_learning/courses\\_ug\\_2014\\_spring.html](http://www.sosc.ust.hk/teaching_learning/courses_ug_2014_spring.html))
- Polytechnic University has no undergraduate Psychology degree and no related course offerings.
- City University of Hong Kong has a degree in Psychology and [SS1611 Movies and psychology] uses movies to illustrate a number of psychology theories to deepen understanding of both psychology and movies and how they play a part in our everyday life. ([http://www.cityu.edu.hk/ug/201415/Major/BSOCSC\\_PSY-1.htm](http://www.cityu.edu.hk/ug/201415/Major/BSOCSC_PSY-1.htm))
- HKBU has a self-funded Psychology degree (for AD/HD holders), and [APPY 4025 Motivation and emotion] seeks to "enhance students' understanding of why people do what they do and why people feel how they feel". ([http://www.cie.hkbu.edu.hk/main/programmes\\_sf\\_courses.php?p=psy](http://www.cie.hkbu.edu.hk/main/programmes_sf_courses.php?p=psy))
- Lingnan University has an Applied Psychology degree, and [GEB 214 Human relationship and interpersonal skills in organizations] covers topics such as "interpersonal dynamics, listening skills, conflict management". (<http://www.ln.edu.hk/ccgeo/curriculum.php>)
- HKSYU offers two degrees, one in Psychology, and the other in Counselling and Psychology. [PSY101 Core competencies in psychology] “helps students to identify the common challenges faced by university students and how to manage them, as well as to guide students develop a healthy lifestyle”. [PSY209 Positive psychology] helps students to understand their own strengths, and to move towards living in a positive psychological state. (<http://www.hksyu.edu/counpsy/bpsy.html>)
- HKIED has a Psychology major programme but no specific courses stand out as having direct relevance to emotional intelligence. (<http://www.ied.edu.hk/ps/view.php?m=677&secid=3224>)

Besides the formal curriculum, all the tertiary institutions have a Student Affairs Office, or Student Development Centre, which takes care of the students' non-academic development such as leadership skills training, counselling, helping with university life, students with disabilities or other learning needs, peer support network etc. Although these are mainly advice-giving bodies, occasionally there are workshop-like short programmes offered to teach students how to understand their own emotions and to tackle common problems they may encounter as a university student. These talks or workshops do not carry any credits and are not part of the requirement for graduation at all.

Although not exhaustive and definitely not detailed in terms of identifying the actual topics and contents of these programmes, this brief review of the current formal and informal curriculum offered in the universities in Hong Kong is useful for my purpose because it shows that even at university level, students in Hong Kong are not really getting a whole-person education which is informed by knowledge of our emotions. If we agree to any extent the significance of the previously mentioned benefits that emotional intelligence can have for leading a balanced and successful life, the introduction of such informed programme for all will be a good progress.

### **Sharing of preliminary ideas about using literary/film narratives for the teaching of emotional intelligence**

As suggested in Zeidner's guidelines for a more vigorous EI program, integrating the teaching of EI into the regular curriculum is an effective approach. In my teaching, I have employed narrative texts in literary and film forms in the teaching of interdisciplinary courses. These narratives, which depict various human experiences and situations, sometimes even difficult ones, are very good materials for illustrating a variety of human emotions, what effects they have on our behaviour, and what consequences might result because of different ways of handling and mishandling these emotions. While well-chosen textual examples can be used for teaching different disciplinary knowledge such as narrative approach, cultural studies, creative writing, gender representation and politics etc., careful design of course material can adopt these well-chosen textual examples to include the teaching of emotional intelligence (and probably a theoretically informed analysis of the text concerning emotional knowledge can add value to the teaching of the discipline). In view of the limitation of space here, I will just make one proposition of how a well-chosen example can be used in the regular disciplinary classroom and yet include emotional intelligence training at the same time.

Roald Dahl's short story "A Great Automatic Grammatizator" (1954) (Dahl, 1970) is a great example for its simplicity in plot, but profound insight into the human condition. There are just three main characters, the creative inventor Knipe, his commercial-minded boss Mr. Bohlen, and an unnamed writer. Knipe has a passion for writing, although he is a genius in computer. He has created a writing machine which is capable of writing short stories (and later novels). He successfully persuades his boss to let him build the machine and later starts a literary agency to sign up existing writers, to let the agency publish materials generated by the writing machine under their names. These writers, having sold their name to the agency, will not write again. The agency becomes very successful and is beginning to monopolize the market. At the end of the story, an unnamed writer is given the contract and he/she finds it hard to decide whether to sign the contract and stop writing, or to be true to his/her desires to be a writer and let the children starve. In my course Language and the Humanities, I use this story to discuss topics such as the creative urge as a human need, different levels of human need, importance of stories in our life, and skills of story telling. If we use Salovey's four-aspect approach to understanding emotional intelligence, the story can be adding much to students' emotional education:

- Perception and identification of the characters' emotions - Bohlen's lack of interest in the project before hearing the monetary benefits, some writers sign up because of their realisation that the machine work is better than theirs, some writers' desparation because of their creative block.
- Using emotions to help thinking - Knipe's understanding of Bohlen's business mind and starts his proposal as a business proposal, then later he appeals to his desire to be remembered as a human being with contribution to society, and his understanding of how the publishing writers at different stages of their career are thinking.
- Understanding emotions - the unnamed writer feels a responsibility towards the crying children, but also toward his/her self as a writer, maybe even about justice in a society too. This writer's dilemma also bring out the possible consequences of the different actions/responses toward the contract - hatred for oneself, or disappointment, for not being a proper parent or not maximizing one's potential.
- Managing emotions - is Knipe merely finding an outlet for his creativity, or is he also harbouring a revenge against those who are more successful than he is in becoming a writer?

## **Conclusion**

In this paper, I have referred briefly to the current scholarship involving emotional intelligence, and have shared some research findings which demonstrate the increasing recognition of the importance of emotional intelligence in leading to a successful life. While in the USA and the UK there have already been quite a widespread belief in emotional intelligence education, and resulting in a large variety of school-based and curriculum-based programmes from the primary to secondary levels, the many education reforms in Hong Kong in recent decades have not resulted in such a programme in the regular curriculum. Even in the university curriculum, only departments of Psychology offer some courses which cover some topics related to emotional intelligence training.

Endorsing the educational benefits that such a programme may have on young people, and recognizing that literature and film could become excellent materials for conducting emotional intelligence education, I have proposed a simple example to illustrate how emotional intelligence training can be done in the Humanities classroom, and how emotional intelligence training can be fully integrated into the regular curriculum. Nelis et al. in their paper "Increasing emotional intelligence: (How) is it possible?" (2009) reported on their research on a small group of university students in France to show that on the whole, it is possible to train young people to identify and to have knowledge about emotional intelligence, and actually make them practice that in their daily life. Their findings show that even after 6 months, the impact of the knowledge is still there. It gives me confidence that emotional intelligence is something teachable and moreover the effects of the learning persist. It is high time that educators in Hong Kong actively incorporate the learning of the emotions into the subjects they are teaching to enhance the teaching and learning experience.

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