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Classroom mood and the dance of stance: The role of affective and epistemic stancetaking in the development of a classroom mood

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ABSTRACT

Our paper offers a new theoretical and methodological approach to the study of moods in academic settings. We begin by introducing the concept of classroom mood as a phenomena distributed across time and across people. Then we propose a method for studying classroom mood using the linguistic anthropological notion of stance. We demonstrate this method through an analysis of a year-long video ethnography of literacy teaching and learning in a first-grade classroom. In this analysis, we document how a collaborative-problem-solving mood, one form of emotional experience, emerges through stancetaking over time as a communicative, collaborative, and relational process. Our analysis describes how a teacher and her students coordinated affective and epistemic stances dialogically and opportunistically to build a collaborative problem-solving mood over time. This mood called forth (solicited) particular actions from students to participate competently in the learning activity, which included joint attention, effortful listening, and correct tool use (strategies/sound cards). Our analysis demonstrates how contextual moods influence engagement in learning.

> *Understanding is always moody*
> Heidegger, 1927, p. 142

1. Introduction

Both the calm and the flurried moments of classroom life are permeated by moods that influence children's learning experiences. The mood of a classroom can be as serious as a million dollar game show, as playful as an improvisational comedy, or as dead and dull as an administrative meeting. But whatever the mood is, one thing is clear, as any teacher can tell you, moods pervade classroom learning.

Considering the pervasiveness of classroom moods for student learning and, in light of the recent excitement over "emotion" and "affect" in educational research (Fleer & Hammer, 2013; Riquelme & Montero, 2013; Zins, Bloodworth, Weissberg, & Walberg, 2007), the paucity of investigations into classroom moods is striking (for exceptions see, Boler & Greene, 1999; Sarason, 1999). Even in

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Vygotskian circles, the emphasis has been on the more individualized concepts of "emotion" and "affect" rather than on the more distributed and socially emergent concept of "mood" (Roth, 2008).

In what follows, we describe some of the ontological and methodological stumbling blocks that have tripped up researchers who have ventured into the terrain of research on classroom moods. We propose an alternative understanding of mood that can help to clear away some of these stumbling blocks. Based on this understanding of mood, we introduce a method for characterizing classroom mood that builds on the linguistic anthropological notion of *stance*. Following this, we demonstrate this method in an analysis of the mood of a first-grade classroom literacy lesson.

1.1. Studies of affect and emotion

We suggest that the reason for the paucity of research into the interrelationship of context and emotion in general and moods specifically is due, in large part, to the theoretical assumptions of a cognitive approach that considers emotions to be states internal to the individual (cf. Lynch, Foley-Peres, & Sullivan, 2008; Valiente, Lemery-Chalfant, & Swanson, 2010). The major stumbling block is the emotion researcher's ontological commitment to an understanding of emotions as individual psychological states. As a consequence, this ontological commitment views emotion as real and essential psychological states. This view naturally leads emotion researchers to employ methods that identify the psychological states of individuals, an approach that Sawyer calls methodological individualism (Sawyer, 2001, 2005). As Sawyer (2005) writes, "methodological individualism refers to the experimental methods of research psychology, where the unit of analysis is a single randomly sampled individual and where the variables are all measured properties of individuals" (p. 6–7).

Taken together, the ontological and methodological commitments lead emotion researchers to a very individualistic approach to emotion. As a result, emotion researchers typically use individualistic measures such as experience sampling, surveys, interviews, questionnaires, and decontextualized lists (Pavlenko, 2005; e.g., Bryan, Mathur, & Sullivan, 1996; McAllister & Irvine, 2002). These are used, typically after the fact, to document an individual's affect or emotion (Lundquist, Holmberg, Burström, & Landström, 2003; Titsworth, Quinlan, & Mazer, 2010; Wrobel & Lachar, 1998).

We should note that in these studies as well as others, researchers often invoke the term we are using here, namely "mood" (cf. Bohn-Gettler & Rapp, 2011; Munz & Fallert, 1998; Pavlenko, 2005). Yet their employment of the term differs significantly from how we are using it. In their work, they tend to remain within an individualistic framework in which they will refer to an individual's mood. For these researchers, "mood" is a term that refers to individual affect and emotion. When moods and feelings are viewed as self-reported inner states, attention is drawn away from the socially distributed aspects of emotional experiences, what we are here calling mood.

At present, however, there is a call for new methods and new theories to capture how emotion is an inherent part of social and interactional processes of learning contexts (cf. Do & Schallert, 2004; Meyer & Turner, 2006; Schutz & Lanehart, 2002; Stone & Cabral, 2008). Our approach to mood offers one such theory and method that seeks to recover the important role of context in learning. We suggest that this approach can avoid some of the ontological and methodological stumbling blocks that have led prior emotion researchers to systematically neglect the active role of social situation and context in the routine practices of teaching and learning (Vygotsky, 1935, 1978).

Our approach to mood follows an emerging current in theorizing about emotional experiences in context that is gaining momentum (cf. Holodynski, 2013; Roth, 2008; Silver, 2011; Vadeboncoeur & Collie, 2013). This change was sparked in educational research by the growing recognition that feelings, moods, and attitudes play a central role in communicative, cognitive, and motivational processes in learning (Ainley, 2006; Meyer & Turner, 2006; Rusk, Tamir, & Rothbaum, 2011).

Following Silver's (2011) work, we propose mood as a socially emergent construct. As noted above, in contrast with the more individualistic notions of affect and emotion, mood is a social emergent phenomenon that exists both beyond and between individuals (Silver, 2011). Thus, in this study, we seek to understand the building of a "classroom mood" by paying particular attention to the socially distributed interactive mechanisms that create and sustain moods and make them an inextricable part of our lived experience.

2. Vygotsky, *perezhivanie*, and mood

The approach of sociocultural theories of learning and development can help to avoid some of the troubles that have led emotion researchers away from studying the pervasive moods of classrooms, most notably the problem of ontological and methodological individualism. We propose a distributed and collective concept of mood as a critical aspect of research on emotion and learning. In our approach to mood, we follow a generally Vygotskian frame to thinking about the dialectical relation between the individual and the collective, and develop two key points from Vygotsky's writings on emotion.

First, Vygotsky (1935) points to the importance of emotional experience. As Vygotsky contends, "The emotional experience [*perezhivanie*] arising from any situation or from any aspect of his environment, determines what kind of influence this situation or this environment will have on the child" (pp. 339–340). Here Vygotsky proposes that the emotional experience of the child is essential for determining the import of the situation for the child. When considered in light of classroom interactions, as we will do in this paper, Vygotsky's insight suggests that if we wish to understand the impact of classroom interactions upon the student then we will need to understand emotional experience in the classroom.

The notion of mood that we propose here is an attempt to capture one very consequential aspect of the environment of the classroom as it shapes the emotional experience of the student. And just as Vygotsky (1935) notes that the "*dynamic and relative*