CHAPTER 12

# CONCLUSION

This book highlights the importance of emotions in student experiences of higher education, from the point of matriculation, through studying particular subjects, to examinations and reminiscences on university.

In addition to illustrating feelings associated with student learning and development, this book makes evident how the work of teachers is also emotionally charged. Teachers are heavily invested in their work – whether that is their subject matter (as in Zarrop's 'Mathematica Erotica' or Tyx's 'The Pleasures of Teaching Emily Dickinson') or in nurturing students (as in Terry Martin's 'Office Hours' or Suzanne Roberts' 'Try Teaching at the Community College').

As you have seen, this book is organized roughly in terms of the chronology of student experience through university, informed by key theoretical frameworks that best describe or explain the emotions observed at various junctures. In this concluding chapter, I suggest a different organizing principle that may help us, as a field and as a community of practitioners, to move forward in our practice and research.

I propose that emotion matters in higher education because education is relational and emotions are central to relationships. Many theories of learning, as well as the now copious literature on student engagement (e.g. Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, & Whitt, 2005; Zepke & Leach, 2011), recognize that relationships are vital to the learning process in higher education. How we feel *with* and *about* others are central to the quality of our relationships. As teachers, we can consciously seek to enrich the positive emotions associated with key relationships in higher education and strengthen the relationships that are at the heart of student learning.

Elsewhere I have discussed four key relationships in higher education and suggested how teachers might enrich those (Quinlan, 2016). First, university students engage with particular subject matters – the objects of learning with which they are forming deeper relationships. Second, students and teachers interact. Third, students be-friend and learn with other students. Finally, students have a relationship with themselves through the forging of (or honing of) new identities during higher education. In each of these four relationships – with subject, with teachers, with peers and with self – feelings are elicited that influence both whether that relationship expands or shrinks and students' present and future performance. These four relationships are already captured in the literature of higher education (Quinlan, 2016) and reiterated in these poems.

These poems, though, also highlight other key relationships that matter in higher education. For instance, we see relationships with family and communities of origin, such as in Katie Thornton's 'Hiraeth' and Carolyn Locke's 'Chestnuts' and 'Leaving again,' as well as Jennifer A. McGowan's 'The Making of Him' and Bradfield's 'Distance Education.' These relationships – and the emotions associated with them – are of increased importance in a context of both widening participation and internationalization agendas. In some cases, students are coming from cultural contexts with higher stakes on their achievement and with different interpretations of the meaning of a university education. To the extent that governments are sponsoring students, obligations to one's nation introduce another set of expectations and pressures on students. Attachments and commitments to family, community and country affect the emotional landscape not only for these students, but for those interacting with them.

Students also forge a relationship with place while in university (see Gruenewald, 2003 for a discussion of 'place-based' education). The importance of the geographic relationship is not well-addressed in educational literature, yet learning is taking place within certain spaces. Those spaces – libraries (e.g. Guess' 'In the Library'), gardens (Drake's 'Sunken Garden'), apartments (McLean's 'Cupboard Love'), and the local community (Gardner's 'Haven Poe' and Halifax's "She waited") are vital aspects of the learning environment. Attention to the context – physical, social and cultural – is particularly timely as we shift toward online learning spaces. We need to consider how emotional attachments form in a variety of environments.

Learning and teaching are also taking place within historical contexts. As the poems in chapter 6 show, the broader world with its deaths, wars, environmental crises and wonders all continue even as students come in and out of our classrooms. Broader cultural events influence students' thinking (and feelings) and have the potential to shape what and how we teach, as well as what students learn during the formative years of higher education.

Yet much of the existing research on emotion in education is psychological. It focuses heavily on individual, intra-personal processes. These poems and the review of literature in chapter 2, though, suggest that we need to pay more attention to the socio-cultural contexts of emotion. Learning and teaching are, fundamentally, human activities. They involve emotions as well as cognition, and they are social and relational. Focusing on strengthening key relationships, including with the social, cultural and physical environments within which learning takes place, is a vital next step.

Although teachers in higher education are often exhorted to take a student-centered perspective (e.g. Ramsden, 1992), one conclusion of this book is that we might do well to see students as not merely at the center of a relationship between teacher and student, but at the center of learning habitats. We can adopt a more ecological model of education (Bronfenbrenner, 1986; Schultz, 2014) that sees the variety of interdependencies within which students and teachers are embedded. Students interact with their own past and possible selves, with peers, with the subjects they

study (becoming members of disciplinary communities), with their universities, with the communities in which those universities exist, with their communities of origin, and with the broader world. Such an emphasis on the nested relationships students inhabit will focus teachers' attention not simply on individual students and how they vary, but, rather on creating spaces and opportunities that include, nurture and enrich the experiences of a variety of students as they transition into new communities of learning and practice.

In sum, I hope this book provides a stimulus to further discussion and discourse among teachers about the role of emotions in higher education. I hope, too, that it may stimulate more inquiry, particularly research which is theoretically grounded and expands our understanding of the social and relational nature of emotions.

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