

Exploring the role of positive emotions in leadership learning

Journal of
Leadership
Education

Haley Traini

Oregon State University, Corvallis, Oregon, USA

Katherine McKee

North Carolina State University, Raleigh, North Carolina, USA, and

Jennifer Smist and David Michael Rosch

University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, Urbana, Illinois, USA

Received 29 October 2024
Revised 7 January 2025
Accepted 7 January 2025

Abstract

Purpose – This project represents an exploratory qualitative investigation of the connection between undergraduate students' experiences of positive emotions in academic leadership courses and their self-reports of leadership learning.

Design/methodology/approach – Our research team conducted a qualitative analysis of 298 post-course survey comments from students in academic courses focused on leader development over three academic years. These surveys included prompts inviting students to report dominant emotions they repeatedly felt within the classroom environment and how these salient emotions helped or hindered their learning over the course of the semester.

Findings – Our results suggest a complex interplay between the ways students' self-reported experience of positive emotions during a leadership class influenced their leadership learning and course engagement. Overall, student responses revealed positive emotions through their course engagement, with interest, joy and serenity/contentment being the most frequently reported positive emotions. Participants attributed these emotions to influencing their willingness to attend class, participate in class activities, deepen their learning about leadership topics and apply their leadership learning beyond the class.

Originality/value – Educational research has long shown that emotions are relevant to specific learning processes. However, this research has not yet been applied to leadership-focused classrooms. Our novel study focused on the connections between emotional reactions to leadership courses and student learning and was designed to help unlock the primary mechanisms by which young people learn to lead through formal academic coursework.

Keywords Positive emotions, Broaden and build theory, Leadership learning, Student emotions, Qualitative research

Paper type Research paper

Introduction and literature review

Students experience many emotions throughout their academic journey (Pekrun, Goetz, Titz, & Perry, 2002). These emotions are complex and varied and encompass both positive and negative feelings. They are also deeply influenced by a student's personality, learning environment, and approach to learning (Pekrun *et al.*, 2002; Schmidt, 2020). Academic emotions have been strongly linked to motivation, learning strategies, cognitive resources, self-regulation, and overall academic performance (Pekrun *et al.*, 2002). Research demonstrates a significant relationship between positive emotions and enhanced learning. A key insight from this body of work is that different positive emotions are triggered by distinct situations, instructional methods, classroom relationships, and achievement outcomes

© Haley Traini, Katherine McKee, Jennifer Smist and David Michael Rosch. Published in *Journal of Leadership Education*. This article is published under the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY 4.0) licence. Anyone may reproduce, distribute, translate and create derivative works of this article (for both commercial and non-commercial purposes), subject to full attribution to the original publication and authors. The full terms of this licence may be seen at <http://creativecommons.org/licences/by/4.0/legalcode>



Journal of Leadership Education
Emerald Publishing Limited
1552-9045
DOI 10.1108/JOLE-10-2024-0123

(Fredrickson, 1998; Pekrun *et al.*, 2002; Rowe, Fitness, & Wood, 2015; Schmidt, 2020; Trigwell, Ellis, & Han, 2012; Vail, 1994; White, 2013; Wolfe, 2006).

However, little investigation has explored how the emotions experienced by students in leadership-focused classrooms influence their self-reported learning within the context of postsecondary leadership development courses. This gap is particularly relevant, as leadership courses often involve socially interactive and experiential activities. Jenkins (2012) notes that discussions, games, group projects, and icebreakers are typical strategies in these courses, where emotions are more likely to arise than passive activities like notetaking during lectures. We argue that understanding how these emotions affect learning could provide valuable insights into the learning processes specific to leadership courses. In this study, we aim to address the gap in leadership learning research by exploring how the emotions students experience in leadership courses might contribute to their learning and development within those courses.

Emotions can either enrich or inhibit learning. Negative emotions, such as fear or frustration, often weaken or disrupt the learning process, while positive emotions, like joy and interest, can ignite and enhance it (Schmidt, 2020; Trigwell *et al.*, 2012; Vail, 1994). Specifically, joy—a sense of happiness resulting from success—and interest—a focused engagement with an event or object—have improved students' memory, concentration, and interpersonal communication (Rowe *et al.*, 2015). Positive emotions are also correlated with better performance on academic tasks and overall achievement (Pekrun *et al.*, 2002; Trigwell *et al.*, 2012; White, 2013). By creating opportunities that foster these positive emotions, instructors can help students engage more deeply in learning and enhance their academic success.

Classroom instruction and social environments that grow in engaging classrooms have been shown to influence students' emotions related to their perceptions of control of their experience and their value in the classroom environment (Pekrun *et al.*, 2002). Numerous factors inside and outside of course instructors' control might be related to the emotions that students experience in an academic setting. Still, if research shows how powerful the emotional experience for students is in correlating with deep learning, leadership educators should seek to create optimal emotional reactions in their leader development coursework.

Various researchers have emphasized the importance of course design, structure, and teaching practices in creating emotionally supportive learning environments for students. For instance, Pekrun *et al.* (2002) recommend fostering autonomy by encouraging students to direct their learning, using a growth mindset approach to feedback, and cultivating cooperative, supportive classroom interactions. Rowe *et al.* (2015) identified three key conditions that promote optimal emotional reactions: (1) course content that relates to students' lived experiences and is delivered passionately by instructors, (2) a positive classroom climate and collaborative relationships between students and faculty, and (3) student attributes like a sense of achievement, certainty, and control over their learning. To optimize student success, instructors must create opportunities encouraging deep learning, where students seek to understand material by applying concepts to real-life situations and making meaningful connections. This approach is associated with more positive emotions and intrinsic motivation, whereas surface learning, often driven by fear, leads to negative emotions and hinders motivation (Schmidt, 2020; Trigwell *et al.*, 2012). Building on this, instructors should combine effective instructional practices with an environment that supports psychological safety, as stressors in classrooms where students do not feel safe to take risks can create barriers to learning and retention. When paired with a psychologically safe classroom community, active learning strategies such as simulations, role plays, and problem-based learning can significantly enhance learning and retention (Wolfe, 2006). Leadership educators should strive to integrate these practices to foster emotional well-being and deep learning in their students.

Past research has shown that many leadership educators frequently employ these collaborative and experiential learning strategies and create supportive and psychologically safe learning communities in leadership courses (Guthrie & Jenkins, 2018; Jenkins, 2020). However, a crucial gap exists in this stream of scholarship. Most research that correlates positive emotions and learning focuses on “what” contributes to the correlation but not “how” those factors might affect each other. This research study aimed to tease out such inter-relationships between emotional experiences and learning outcomes. We invited students to share their emotional experiences and describe directly how those experiences contributed to (or detract from) their learning of leadership concepts.

Theoretical framework

In this study, we applied Fredrickson’s (1998) broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions to examine how students in a postsecondary leadership class connected their emotional experiences to their leadership learning. Fredrickson’s theory suggests that positive emotions expand an individual’s mindset, fostering openness to new ideas, novel ways of thinking, and forming connections. These positive experiences, in turn, help build social, emotional, and psychological resources that can be drawn upon in the future, enhancing well-being, success, and personal growth. This creates an upward spiral that contributes to human flourishing, where the accumulation of these resources supports long-term health, fulfillment, and resilience (Fredrickson, 2013).

Positive and negative emotions can be described as “multicomponent response tendencies incorporating muscle tension, hormone release, cardiovascular changes, facial expression, attention, and cognition, among other changes that unfold over a relatively short time span.” (Fredrickson & Cohn, 2008, p. 778). Emotions arise from the cognitive evaluation of specific events (i.e. how we think about something that happens), which may occur consciously or unconsciously. These cognitive evaluations can occur independently of external physical stimuli. In other words, cognitive evaluations can include actual experiences (e.g. feeling joy when a journal article is recommended for publication) or internal experiences (e.g. feeling joy when remembering the moment you heard you earned promotion and tenure). In other words, the emotion is a result or response to something. Fredrickson (2004) uses the term “appraisal” to describe this process. This appraisal initiates a chain of response tendencies that manifest across multiple systems, including subjective experiences, facial expressions, and physiological changes (Fredrickson, 2004). Positive emotions are also distinguished from positive moods. Emotions typically revolve around personally significant circumstances, are transient, and occupy the forefront of conscious awareness (Fredrickson, 2004). Conversely, moods are often diffuse, enduring, and reside in the background of consciousness (Oatley & Jenkins, 1996; Rosenberg, 1998).

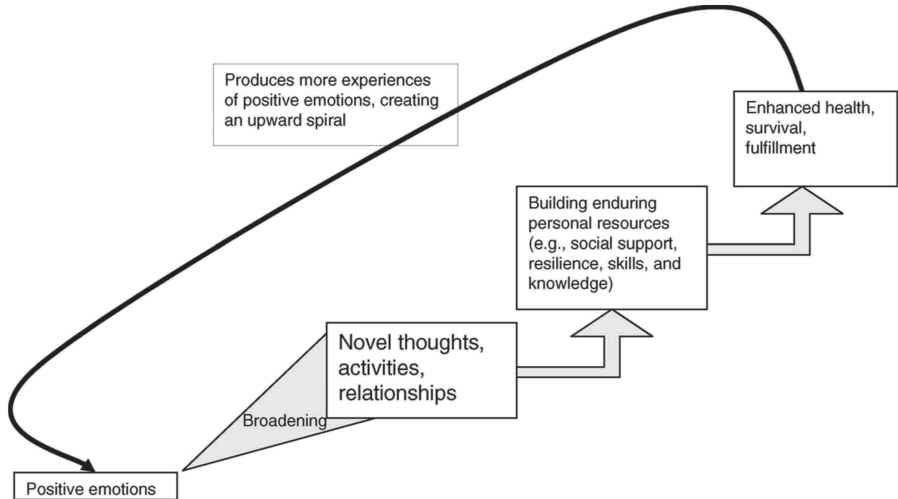
Positive and negative emotions differ in that the appraisal of events, occurrences, or memories is either positive or negative. When a person appraises their current situation as negative, it triggers negative emotions; conversely, when they perceive it as positive, it triggers positive emotions. Positive emotions, which have evolved through natural selection over thousands of years, enhance an individual’s survival ability (Fredrickson, 2013). This was accomplished by temporarily expanding their awareness, leading to a type of consciousness encompassing a broader range of thoughts, behaviors, and perceptions (Fredrickson, 2013). Unlike negative emotions, which prompt immediate survival responses like fighting or fleeing, positive emotions impact survival over a longer duration. In this way, positive emotions briefly expand our mindset, enabling discovery and the creation of new knowledge, forming social connections, and developing new skills. These resources, built through experiencing positive emotions, propel individuals forward and prepare them for encountering more positive emotions in the future. This creates an

upward spiral that enhances the chances of survival and overall health and well-being (Fredrickson, 2013) (See Figure 1).

Fredrickson’s broaden-and-build theory (2013) includes two hypotheses: the *broaden hypothesis* and the *build hypothesis*. The *broaden hypothesis* postulates that positive emotions broaden or widen one’s thought-action repertoire in the moment, which ignites novel ideas, boosts creative thinking, and sparks generosity, among other reactions. The broadening effect is a result of a “cognitive shift, one in which boundaries of awareness stretch open a bit further during positive emotional experiences, enabling people to connect the dots between disparate ideas and thereby act creatively, flexibly, and with greater sensitivity to future time horizons” (Fredrickson, 2013, p. 18). Multiple experiments have offered evidence bolstering the broaden effect. Specifically, studies have shown that experiencing positive emotions broadens action urges (i.e. people felt more inclined to do and experience more) (Fredrickson & Branigan, 2005), increases holistic processing (i.e. looking at the big picture, higher-order thinking, seeing overall patterns), expand attention flexibility (i.e. the ability to shift attention between objects or levels of focus) (Johnson, Waugh, & Fredrickson, 2010), broaden the scope of someone’s visual attention (Wadlinger & Isaacowitz, 2006), and expand someone’s circle of trust (Dunn & Schweitzer, 2005).

The *build hypothesis* postulates that positive emotions build durable social, emotional, intellectual, and psychological resources that can be drawn upon in the future (Fredrickson, 2013). These emotions can help place people on “positive trajectories of growth” (Fredrickson, 2013, p. 24). Fredrickson and Cohn (2008) state that “through experiencing positive emotions, people transform themselves into more creative, knowledgeable, resilient, socially integrated, and healthy individuals” (p. 783). Ample evidence supports this claim (Fredrickson, 1998, 2001, 2005; Fredrickson, Tugade, Waugh, & Larkin, 2003; Fredrickson & Losada, 2005; Lyubomirsky, King, & Diener, 2005; Mauss et al., 2011).

Fredrickson’s (2013) work focuses on the top ten positive emotions, those that occur most frequently in people’s daily lives. In order of frequency are love, joy, gratitude, serenity/contentment, interest, hope, pride, amusement, inspiration, and awe. Specific appraisal patterns, such as the abovementioned cognitive evaluations can trigger each discrete emotion. Appraisals occur almost instantaneously and often sub-consciously, allowing individuals to



Source(s): Fredrickson and Cohn (2008)

Figure 1. The broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions

gauge whether a situation is beneficial or harmful to their overall welfare (Frijda, 1986; Lazarus, 1991). When activated or triggered, certain emotions prompt specific patterns of thought and action (called thought-action repertoires), leading to a range of perceived actions individuals choose to take. These emotions also help build durable physical, intellectual, social, or psychological resources. For instance, the emotion of interest emerges when situations are perceived as secure and intriguing, and people experience interest when they come across something mysterious or challenging yet not too daunting (appraisal). The emotional response of “interest” then fuels the desire to investigate, acquire knowledge, and fully engage with new experiences, thereby enriching oneself (thought-action repertoire). The information and knowledge gained in this process become lasting assets (durable resources). Table 1 offers a glimpse of the ten key positive emotions, cognitive appraisals that may trigger

Table 1. Description of ten positive emotions

| Emotion | Appraisal that triggers it | Thought-action repertoire it sparks | The durable resources that it helps build |
|--------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------|
| Love | Love, closeness, or trust. Arises when other positive emotions are felt in the context of a safe interpersonal connection or relationship | Any/all of the above, with mutual care | Any/all of the above, especially social bonds and community |
| Joy | Feeling safe, familiar, unexpectedly good. When one’s current circumstances present unexpected good fortune | Creates the urge to play or get involved | Skills gained via experiential learning |
| Gratitude | Receives a gift or benefit. When someone acknowledges another person as the source of unexpected good fortune | The creative urge to be prosocial, kind, and generous to oneself | New skills for showing care, kindness, loyalty, social bonds |
| Serenity/ contentment | Safe, familiar, low effort. When people interpret their circumstances as right, cherished, at ease, at one with their situation, or satisfying | Save and integrate into new priorities | New priorities, new views of self, more refined sense of sense |
| Interest | Arises in circumstances appraised as safe but offering novelty, mysterious or challenging but not overwhelming | Creates the urge to explore, learn, expand self, and immerse oneself in the novelty | Knowledge gained |
| Hope | Hopeful, optimistic, or encouraged. Arises in circumstances in which people fear the worst yet yearn for better | Plan for a better future | Resilience to adversity, optimism |
| Pride | Arises when people take credit for socially valued good outcomes or accomplish an important goal | Creates the urge to dream big | Achievement motivation |
| Amusement | Amused, fun-loving, or silly; when people identify their circumstances as involving non-serious incongruity | Creates the urge to laugh and be jovial | Social bonds formed and endured |
| Inspiration | Inspired, uplifted, or elevated. Emerges when people witness human excellence | Creates urge to excel or reach personal best | Motivation for personal growth |
| Awe | Awe, wonder, amazement. Emerges when people encounter goodness on a grand scale | Compels people to absorb and accommodate the vastness they’ve encountered | New worldviews |

Source(s): Adapted from Fredrickson (2013)

each, the broadened thought-action repertoire each might spark, and the durable resources that each might help build. We designed our research study with this overall framework in mind to investigate students' reported emotional responses within leadership-focused classrooms and how their responses may or may not have contributed to their learning.

Research questions

Given extant research that positions positive emotions as playing a key role in the learning process and the usefulness of the broaden-and-build theory in the absence of this conversation in the leadership education literature, our goal was to explore how students connect experiences of positive emotions to their experience in a leadership class. Two research questions guided our inquiry: (1) *How do students experience positive emotions when engaging in a postsecondary leadership course?* and (2) *In what ways do students attribute expressed positive emotions to their learning experiences in a leadership course?*

Methods

Sample, population, and data collection

All data was collected at a large, research-extensive university located in the Midwestern United States from the Fall 2020 semester to the Spring 2022 semester. Students who provided data were enrolled in academic courses that focused on leadership development, such as "foundations of leadership," "leadership in group and teams," "leadership communications," etc. All courses were open to students of all academic disciplines. Enrolled students were invited to complete a post-course qualitative survey at the end of each academic semester. The survey intended to assess learning, leader skill development, and student interactions with various course attributes, including the instructor, peers, and assignments, among other factors. The post-course survey included two open-ended questions related to emotions. These included, "Think about how you FELT when you participated in this leadership course. What emotions come to mind?" and "How did these emotions affect your learning about leadership?" We received 298 survey responses from students across the six semesters in which we collected data. Some responses were likely from the same student, collected across different classes and academic semesters.

Data analysis procedures

Two members of the research team began by using [Fredrickson's \(2013\)](#) ten representative positive emotions (love, joy, gratitude, serenity, interest, hope, pride, amusement, inspiration, and awe) as provisional codes to analyze the 298 responses to the two open-response survey items listed above. Provisional codes are predetermined codes or a "start list" of codes researchers use for first-cycle coding methods ([Miles, 1994](#); [Saldaña, 2009](#)). Provisional codes are derived from literature reviews, researcher experiences, previous research findings, or, as in our case, conceptual frameworks, and useful for studies that build on existing work or focus variables of interest ([Saldaña, 2009](#)). Using provisional codes as a first round of coding allowed for a process where each survey response could be sorted into sets of positive emotions and ready for additional analysis. Specifically, we coded the responses from the open-ended question, "Think about how you FELT when you participated in this leadership course. What emotions come to mind?". The provisional coding process was highly iterative between the two researchers who led this coding process. Each provided a "reality check" for the other. After several rounds of iterative interpretation, the provisional codes were sent to a third research team member to verify the codes and ensure they aligned with the theoretical descriptions of each positive emotion.

We then engaged in a series of second cycle, focused coding to build an understanding of how reported positive emotions contributed to student leadership learning ([Saldaña, 2009](#); [Strauss & Corbin, 1998](#)). Each student response coded into the provisional codebook was

analyzed in conjunction with their response to the second open-ended survey question, “How did these emotions affect your learning about leadership?” We were first interested in determining if patterns emerged *within* the provisional codes (i.e. if students connected discrete emotions to particular course learning outcomes). However, we quickly determined that most students did not identify these types of connections in their responses. Therefore, we followed with a more broad, focused coding approach that looked more broadly for the most prominent categories and themes from the data (Saldaña, 2009). This process was accompanied by analytical memos and personal debriefings between the two authors, who led the analysis to reveal our thinking about the codes, categories, and themes we developed. After several iterations of analysis, the most salient initial codes developed into the themes we discuss below (Charmaz, 2006).

Author positionality statement

We are four leadership education faculty of leader development at three distinct research-extensive universities in the United States. While the data we analyzed were anonymized, two of us have likely served as instructors for students who provided data within this study. To enhance trustworthiness and credibility throughout the data analysis process, the two researchers who did not teach the student participants in this study led the data analysis process.

Each of us contends that experiencing positive emotions can likely influence the leader and leadership development process and that the course participants discussed in this study are effective contributors to student leader development. We are also committed to better understanding the mechanisms and processes within formal leadership-focused courses that contribute to student growth and development, leading us to the topics from which this project was founded. We end this paper with a reflection on additional author positionality and to pull the curtain back a bit further.

Findings

Through repeated rounds of coding, we gathered insights into the emotions experienced by students in a postsecondary leadership course and how they connected those emotions to their learning journey. Of the 298 student responses to the two open-ended survey questions, 249 responses identified their primary emotion as positive, of which 244 were coded into Fredrickson’s (2013) ten representative positive emotions. Twenty-one respondents reported a negative emotion, and 38 students reported words or phrases that did not easily code as an emotion (e.g. “growth,” “all emotions”). The most salient emotions were interest, joy, serenity, and pride. The frequency of each emotion and examples of statements coded under these emotions are found in Table 2.

Participants attributed these positive emotions to their leadership learning in multiple and unique ways. However, three salient ideas consistently appeared, resulting in constructing three respective themes: (1) *Gateway to Engagement*, (2) *Deepening Desire to Learn*, and (3) *Motivation for Application*. Below, we briefly describe each theme with accompanying illustrative quotes. Quotes with a “...” between segments indicate the integration of participant responses across the two open-ended survey questions; *think about how you felt when you participated in this leadership course. What emotions come to mind? why? How did these emotions affect your learning about leadership?* Following each quote is the respective emotion code in parentheses.

Theme one: gateway to engagement

Students attributed positive emotions as gateways to motivation to attend class, pay attention, and engage in the learning process. Feeling interested, happy, calm, hopeful, and amused

Table 2. Positive emotions felt by students in a leadership course

| Emotion | <i>f</i> | Example student response |
|--------------------------|----------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Love | 2 | Empathy- feeling for others and their experiences |
| Joy | 49 | I felt joy from speaking my mind and feeling accomplished |
| Gratitude | 5 | Appreciation and gratefulness because this is the most enriching class and teaching I've experienced |
| Serenity/ contentment | 48 | I really felt very content, never stressed like most of my other classes. It felt very comfortable as all the people were welcoming |
| Interest | 75 | Interested. Wanting to know more |
| Hope | 9 | Optimistic- I enjoyed coming up with solutions |
| Pride | 35 | Powerful, capable: We were able to take on an issue we were passionate about |
| Amusement | 5 | I had a lot of fun in this class. Although there were times I was late, I am always excited coming to this class |
| Inspiration | 11 | Inspired. After this class, I felt like I could be an effective leader |
| Awe | 5 | My mind opened up |
| Other positive | 5 | Positivity because of the environment and relevant material |
| Total positive | 249 | |

Source(s): Table by authors

created a desire to show up every day, eager for a new, joyful, and interesting learning experience. Many students attributed the feelings they experienced to sharing that they “love the class,” often stating that their leadership course was their favorite class and the one they prioritized when it came to completing coursework. Others attributed a welcoming, collaborative atmosphere to the prospect of “something fun to do” (amusement) as their reasons for attending class. One student shared they felt “engaged, excited, interested” (interest), and this made them “more invested and excited to come to class and learn” (interest). Experiences of joy, serenity, and hope created an environment where students were comfortable participating. Many students specifically associated feelings of joy with the desire to be involved and engaged in class activities. Students also connected serene feelings to an increased willingness and ability to express their thoughts freely during class discussions. This was attributed to a comfortable and positive atmosphere, feeling cared for and seen, and feeling like peers and instructors valued their opinions. For example, one student shared, “It felt very comfortable as all people were welcoming. . . It helped me open up more and express freely” (serenity), while another offered, “I felt welcomed...[which] made it easy to participate” (serenity).

In the broader-and-build framework context, we find that specific appraisal patterns of a comfortable classroom environment, feeling cared for and respected by peers and instructors, and a general positive culture trigger emotions of joy, amusement, serenity, and interest among students. These situations and occurrences trigger positive emotions, which then propel student actions such as regular class attendance, active participation, prioritizing coursework, freely sharing thoughts and feelings, and overall engagement in the course.

Theme two: deepening desire to learn

Experiencing emotions of joy, interest, inspiration, serenity, and pride instilled a desire and drive to learn leadership concepts. Students used words like “curious,” “intrigued,” “confident,” and “happy,” among others, to capture how these emotions motivated them to understand the material taught in class, work harder on coursework, and become “eager to learn more” (interest). For example, one student shared, “Curious, positive. This class was engaging and interesting...These emotions made me want to learn more and kept me motivated to succeed throughout the semester” (interest). Several other students connected the emotion of interest to a deepening desire to learn or engage more fully in the learning process. This was

expressed through comments such as, “new concepts I didn’t know were part of leading... It made me want to learn as much as I can so that I can lead and follow to the best of my ability” (interest), “It made me interested and eager to learn more” (interest) and, “Visualized, intrigued, curious. . .I wanted to learn more” (interest).

Other students connected joyful feelings to their contributions to their group, which made them “want to learn more about leadership” (joy). Two students shared, “Happy and Joy. I think this class focuses on becoming the best person you can be, creating a great environment...They [instructors] really help my learning because I want to learn more about the topics” (joy) and “Happy, it genuinely made me happy to contribute to a group...They [instructors] made me want to learn more about leadership” (joy). Emotions of pride, serenity, and inspiration encouraged learning through connections to the teacher’s passion and the empowering classroom environment. For example, one student shared, “I felt more confident in my leadership abilities... They helped me want to understand leadership more” (pride). Another wrote, “Creativity and empowering. It made me want to become a better leader...It helped and always made me want to learn more” (inspiration).

Within the broaden-and-build framework, certain appraisal patterns emerged as catalysts for emotions like pride, inspiration, joy, and interest among students. These patterns include instructor passion, engaging coursework, exposure to novel concepts, peer-to-peer interactions, and an empowering curriculum emphasizing personal development. These emotional triggers drive behaviors such as a heightened desire to grasp the content, increased dedication to coursework, a sustained eagerness for ongoing learning, and a stronger motivation to excel in the course.

Theme three: motivation for application

Emotions of awe, interest, joy, pride, and inspiration allowed students to think beyond their engagement in their leadership course and begin to consider how they can use their new learning in their own lives. These emotions motivated students to change their behavior, consider future leadership opportunities, and apply their learning in numerous and diverse ways. Students felt excited, invigorated, open-minded, confident, and contemplative, and these emotions sparked a desire to apply the content outside the course, make changes in their lives, and become the best leader they can be. Two students captured this with the following statements, “Empowered...I felt empowered that I can make good changes as a leader” (pride) and “My mind opened up...I took everything I learned into my personal life” (awe). Other students directly connected their emotions to motivation for application. This was shared through comments such as, “I felt excited to be able to share my voice so easily, openly... I felt excited in a way that moved me to further engage with leadership content within and outside of this course” (joy), “It [the emotions] made me feel contemplative and reflective... It made me really think about how to actually apply these principles” (interest), “Empowered because it makes me want to be the best leader I can... It made me want to pay attention more and apply it to other aspects of my life” (pride) and, “Open-mindedness, confidence, and optimism because I feel stronger and sharper to lead...I was able to confidently learn material and put it into my everyday actions” (awe).

Certain appraisal patterns within the broaden-and-build framework catalyze emotions like awe, interest, joy, pride, and inspiration among students. While these patterns were less evident within this theme, they included instances of students actively sharing their ideas and perspectives during class discussions. As a result of these emotional triggers, students experienced feelings of self-confidence, empowerment, reflection, and open-mindedness. These feelings ignited a desire among students to apply their newfound knowledge in future leadership roles and to continue evolving as effective leaders.

Discussion, implications, and recommendations

This study provides insight into how positive emotions might impact students' learning experience in a leadership course. We saw how multiple emotions motivate students to show up, pay attention, participate, engage, and feel agentic in expressing their thoughts and opinions with their peers and instructors. While this finding may not be surprising to experienced leadership educators, it does offer new insights into existing conversations about effective instructional practices in leadership education.

Looking broadly at the more frequently coded emotions, emotions of interest, joy, and serenity/contentment were more salient compared to the other seven. We coded 75 student responses into our data's "interest" code. Recall that interest emerges when individuals appraise situations as secure, intriguing, novel, safe, mysterious, or challenging without feeling overwhelmed (Fredrickson, 2013). Rowe *et al.* (2015) found that students experience interest in part when they perceive course content as personally relevant when a positive classroom climate is present, and when the delivery of the curriculum—along with the teacher's engaging personality—elicits excitement. Our study revealed similar connections, although we could not fully delineate these antecedents to emotional responses. We are also unable to make definitive connections between students experiencing interest and the situation that triggered the cognitive appraisal that triggered this emotion. The second and third most frequently coded positive emotions were joy and serenity/contentment. Emotions of joy are sparked when individuals feel safe, familiar, and unexpectedly good, and this sparks involvement and engagement, resulting in new skills gained and experiential learning (Fredrickson, 2013). Serenity/contentment is sparked when individuals feel calm and comfortable, and in states requiring low effort. This emotion sparks the tendency to savor the moment, which helps develop new views of self and new priorities (Fredrickson, 2013). Like interest, these emotions contributed to each of the three themes, and the data of the data did not allow us to make distinct conclusions about the appraisal patterns that sparked these emotions nor the thought-action repertoires these emotions triggered. And so, looking at these three salient emotions broadly, we are left with several questions. Why these three emotions and not others? What specifically led to these emotions, and is it possible to pinpoint distinct instructional moves that are related to these three emotions? Given the resources these three emotions accrue, in what ways might they shape the overall student trajectories within the context of leader development and leadership education? Future studies exploring these questions would serve as a practical resource for leadership educators and add to the body of literature on the outcomes of leadership programs.

Pivoting to the themes specifically, we found that the positive emotions connected to a welcoming atmosphere and feeling valued—amusement, interest, serenity, joy, and hope—created a *Gateway to Engagement* such that students felt motivated to attend class and engage in the learning. However, it is important to note that while engagement is crucial, it rarely is the endpoint. Instructors should consider how to leverage this engagement to achieve broader course objectives. This leads us to Theme Two. Supporting Schmidt's (2020) findings that instructors must stimulate student interest to generate deep learning, our participants connected joy, interest, inspiration, serenity, and pride to a *Deepening Desire to Learn*. Students shared that these emotions motivated them to grasp the content, complete coursework, and stay eager to learn. One student even wrote, "These emotions made me want to learn more." This shift from initial engagement to sustained motivation is an interesting progression. Still, it's worth noting that the emphasis here was still on the process of learning rather than on capturing specific leadership concepts or skills. This may be, in part, due to the nature of our survey question, which asked, "How did these emotions affect your learning about leadership?" which may have been interpreted in a variety of ways (e.g. curricular design, classroom norms, specific lessons, overall attitudes about learning, etc.). Within our data, students primarily connected their emotions to their overall course experience and engagement rather than to specific leadership knowledge. This represents a limitation of the study. With only two open-ended questions, we did not fully capture how positive emotions

contribute to acquiring and developing concrete leadership concepts and skills. A more comprehensive investigation connecting specific emotions to student learning outcomes would contribute to the existing body of evidence showcasing the short- and long-term benefits of experiencing positive emotions.

Our third theme, *Motivation for Application*, offers perhaps the most promising implications for leadership education. Students experiencing emotions like awe, interest, joy, pride, and inspiration began to think beyond their immediate participation in the course and captured how their leadership learning might influence their future decisions and college experiences. Our data offer preliminary insights into the appraisal patterns that appear to elicit certain positive emotions, such as instructor passion, engaging coursework, exposure to novel concepts, peer-to-peer interaction, class discussions, and supportive classroom environments. However, to a discerning reader, including ourselves, questions remain regarding how these factors materialized in practice. For instance, what constitutes “instructor passion”? Does it manifest in their delivery style, facial expressions, or perhaps through witty quips interwoven into lectures? Similarly, when students refer to a “positive classroom culture,” what specific elements are they identifying? While these concepts may seem intuitively understood, a deeper examination reveals that they warrant further exploration to move beyond surface-level agreement toward a more nuanced understanding.

Fredrickson’s broaden-and-build theory (2013) suggests positive emotions build durable resources that individuals can draw upon in the future. While we did not explicitly measure well-being or flourishing, the positive emotions experienced in these leadership courses may have equipped students with resources that extend beyond the classroom, preparing them for future leadership roles and other life experiences. This is especially important because, as leadership educators, we are often concerned not only with specific learning outcomes related to the course but also with the broader goals of leadership programs, which often seek to develop future leaders who are ethical, effective, and committed to positive social change and addressing the wicked challenges of our time (Morgan, King, Rudd, & Kaufman, 2013; Cletzer et al., 2022; Velez, Moore, Bruce, & Stephens, 2014). As authors, we align with these sentiments and are committed to cultivating positive trajectories of growth in students.

Our findings serve as an important starting point, particularly in considering how specific pedagogical practices and emotional triggers could shape thought-action repertoires. If instructors can work backward from their desired outcomes—both broadly and specifically—they can deliberately create environments that trigger emotions conducive to deeper leadership learning. For example, suppose the goal is for students to pursue further leadership opportunities. In that case, instructors might ask themselves, “*What emotions do I want students to experience that would encourage them to pursue another leadership class or opportunity? What can I do to evoke those emotions?*”. Similarly, in a more focused sense, instructors can reflect on how to elicit emotions like awe (which helps accrue new worldviews as an enduring resource) during a specific class discussion. This could involve using a powerful quote, an inspiring story, or an awe-inspiring video that broadens students’ perspectives and leaves them with a deeper understanding of leadership challenges. We argue that this deliberate emotional design can enhance immediate engagement and long-term leadership development.

While certain emotions emerged more frequently in particular themes, our data did not suggest definitive distinctions between discrete emotions and their distinct effects on learning. Although existing research suggests that discrete positive emotions have unique effects (see Table 1), positive emotions are often more diffuse and difficult to isolate than negative ones (Fredrickson & Cohn, 2008). The nature of our data collection—assessing emotions only once at the end of the semester—did not allow us to capture the rich descriptions of student emotions or the appraisal patterns that triggered them. To gain a more comprehensive understanding of student emotions and the thought-action repertoires they prompt, we recommend more robust data collection methods that combine both quantitative and qualitative approaches.

Future research could utilize tools such as the modified Differential Emotions Scale (mDES) (Fredrickson *et al.*, 2003), the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS) (Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988), or the Academic Emotion Questionnaire (Pekrun *et al.*, 2002) to assess discrete emotions more accurately. The mDES captures the frequency and intensity of twenty emotions, ten positive and ten negative, offering a detailed profile of an individual's emotional experiences. Similarly, the PANAS assesses general positive and negative affect, with ten items assigned to negative and 10 to positive through self-reported ratings of emotion descriptors experienced during a specific time frame. The AEQ is a comprehensive assessment of 80 different emotions in academic contexts, such as anxiety, boredom, and enjoyment during learning and assessment situations. These tools could be administered regularly throughout a course and accompanied by open-ended questions asking students to identify what triggered their emotions and how these emotions influenced their learning. Toward the end of the term, one-on-one interviews or focus groups could provide deeper insight into the emotional landscape of leadership learning. Additionally, future work should connect emotions and thought-action repertoires to specific instructional strategies, such as peer interactions, instructor behavior, and curriculum design, to better understand how positive emotions contribute to leadership learning in the short and long term. Gaining insight into the appraisal patterns initiated by leadership educators—how these trigger student emotions and how those emotions then prompt thought-action repertoires—would provide a complete picture of the broadening effect occurring within individuals in leadership and leader development courses.

Concluding thoughts

This study opens a pathway for further exploration into the power and significance of positive emotions in leadership education. Our findings lay a foundational understanding of how emotions influence student engagement, sustained motivation, and the application of leadership learning, suggesting promising directions for future research and practical application.

As leadership educators, we recognize that facilitating the broaden-and-build process in our students is central to our role. We aim not only to capture their attention within the confines of our classrooms—through discussions, peer interactions, and engagement with key concepts—but also to cultivate openness to new ideas, diverse perspectives, and challenging, often controversial, topics. This requires an atmosphere of humility, where students are willing to engage in self-reflection, receive feedback, and confront areas for growth. By fostering these emotional, social, intellectual, and psychological resources in our students, we ultimately enhance our own instructional effectiveness. While these impacts may not always be easily measured, they remain at the forefront of our minds as we engage in this work. At its core, perhaps this belief in the broader transformative potential of our teaching is what drives us. Although measuring the broadening effect scientifically remains a challenge, we are committed to this endeavor. We hope that the positive experiences we create lead to enduring positive trajectories in our students' growth—trajectories that manifest in both successful leadership and fulfilling lives.

Moreover, we deeply believe in the pedagogical power of positive emotions. As seasoned educators in higher education, we have witnessed firsthand the profound influence these emotions can have in the classroom. We have seen how our intentional teaching strategies impact the ways students interact, respond to lessons, lean into difficult discussions, and express heartfelt gratitude at the end of a term. It is clear to us that the way we present ourselves as instructors shapes the entire classroom experience. Whether through awe-inspiring videos, provocative questions, lighthearted icebreakers, or reflective assignments, we strategically evoke emotional responses to deepen learning. However, until now, we have not explicitly aligned these practices with Fredrickson's theory. Engaging with this framework through our research has allowed us to refine our pedagogical approach even further, and we are excited to pursue future research that not only informs our own work but also contributes to the broader field.

References

- Charmaz, K. (2006). *Constructing grounded theory: A practical guide through qualitative analysis*. London: Sage.
- Cletzer, D. A., Mott, R. L., Simonsen, J. C., Tummons, J. D., Peckman, J. Y., & Preston, K. (2022). Agricultural leadership: A national portrait of undergraduate courses. *Journal of Agricultural Education*, 63(1), 165–181. doi: [10.5032/jae.2022.01165](https://doi.org/10.5032/jae.2022.01165).
- Dunn, J. R., & Schweitzer, M. E. (2005). Feeling and believing: The influence of emotion on trust. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 88(5), 736–748. doi: [10.1037/0022-3514.88.5.736](https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.88.5.736).
- Fredrickson, B. L. (1998). What good are positive emotions?. *Review of General Psychology*, 2(3), 300–319. doi: [10.1037/1089-2680.2.3.300](https://doi.org/10.1037/1089-2680.2.3.300).
- Fredrickson, B. L. (2001). The role of positive emotions in positive psychology: The broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions. *American Psychologist*, 56(3), 218–226. doi: [10.1037/0003-066X.56.3.218](https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.56.3.218).
- Fredrickson, B. L. (2004). The broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions. *Psychological Inquiry*, 11(2), 218–226. doi: [10.1098/rstb.2004.1512](https://doi.org/10.1098/rstb.2004.1512).
- Fredrickson, B. L. (2005). The broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions. In F. A. Huppert, N. Baylis, & B. Keverne (Eds), *The science of well-being* (pp. 217–238). Oxford University Press.
- Fredrickson, B. L. (2013). Positive emotions broaden and build. *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, 47, 1–53. doi: [10.1016/B978-0-12-407236-7.00001-2](https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-0-12-407236-7.00001-2).
- Fredrickson, B. L., & Branigan, C. (2005). Positive emotions broaden the scope of attention and thought-action repertoires. *Cognition & Emotion*, 19(3), 313–332. doi: [10.1080/02699930441000238](https://doi.org/10.1080/02699930441000238).
- Fredrickson, B. L., & Cohn, M. A. (2008). Positive emotions. In M. Lewis, J. M. Haviland-Jones, & L. F. Barrett (Eds), *Handbook of emotions* (pp. 777–796). The Guilford Press.
- Fredrickson, B. L., & Losada, M. F. (2005). Positive affect and the complex dynamics of human flourishing. *American Psychologist*, 60(7), 678–686. doi: [10.1037/0003-066X.60.7.678](https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.60.7.678).
- Fredrickson, B. L., Tugade, M. M., Waugh, C. E., & Larkin, G. R. (2003). What good are positive emotions in crisis? A prospective study of resilience and emotions following the terrorist attacks on the United States on september 11, 2001. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 84(2), 365–376. doi: [10.1037/0022-3514.84.2.365](https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.84.2.365).
- Frijda, N. H. (1986). *The emotions*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Guthrie, K. L., & Jenkins, D. M. (2018). *The role of leadership educators: Transforming learning*. Information Age Publishing.
- Jenkins, D. M. (2012). Exploring signature pedagogies in undergraduate leadership education. *Journal of Leadership Education*, 11(1), 1–27. doi: [10.12806/V11/I1/RF1](https://doi.org/10.12806/V11/I1/RF1).
- Jenkins, D. M. (2020). What the best leadership educators do: A sequential explanatory mixed methods study of instructional and assessment strategy use in leadership education. *Journal of Leadership Education*, 19(4), 37–55. doi: [10.12806/V19/I4/R4](https://doi.org/10.12806/V19/I4/R4).
- Johnson, K. J., Waugh, C. E., & Fredrickson, B. L. (2010). Smile to see the forest: Facially expressed positive emotions broaden cognition. *Cognition & Emotion*, 24(2), 299–321. doi: [10.1080/02699930903384667](https://doi.org/10.1080/02699930903384667).
- Lazarus, R. S. (1991). *Emotion and adaptation*. Cambridge: Oxford University Press.
- Lyubomirsky, S., King, L., & Diener, E. (2005). The benefits of frequent positive affect: Does happiness lead to success?. *Psychological Bulletin*, 131(6), 803–855. doi: [10.1037/0033-2909.131.6.803](https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.131.6.803).
- Mauss, I. B., Shallcross, A. J., Troy, A. S., John, O. P., Ferrer, E., Wilhelm, F. H., & Gross, J. J. (2011). Don't hide your happiness! Positive emotion dissociation, social connectedness, and psychological functioning. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 100(4), 738–748. doi: [10.1037/a0022986](https://doi.org/10.1037/a0022986).
- Miles, M. B. (1994). *Qualitative Data Analysis: An Expanded Sourcebook*. Thousand Oaks.

- Morgan, A. C., King, D. L., Rudd, R. D., & Kaufman, E. K. (2013). Elements of an undergraduate agricultural leadership program: A delphi study. *Journal of Leadership Education, 12*(1), 140–155. doi: [10.12806/JOLE-01-2013-B0002](https://doi.org/10.12806/JOLE-01-2013-B0002).
- Oatley, K., & Jenkins, J. M. (1996). *Understanding emotions*. New York: Blackwell.
- Pekrun, R., Goetz, T., Titz, W., & Perry, R. P. (2002). Academic emotions in students' self-regulated learning and achievement: A program of qualitative and quantitative research. *Educational Psychologist, 37*(2), 91–105. doi: [10.1207/S15326985EP3702_4](https://doi.org/10.1207/S15326985EP3702_4).
- Rosenberg, E. L. (1998). Levels of analysis and the organization of affect. *Review of General Psychology, 2*(3), 247–270. doi: [10.1037/1089-2680.2.3.247](https://doi.org/10.1037/1089-2680.2.3.247).
- Rowe, A. D., Fitness, J., & Wood, L. N. (2015). University student and lecturer perceptions of positive emotions in learning. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education, 28*(1), 1–20. doi: [10.1080/09518398.2013.847506](https://doi.org/10.1080/09518398.2013.847506).
- Saldaña, J. (2009). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers*. London: Sage Publications.
- Schmidt, S. J. (2020). Exploring the influence of course elements and emotional connection to content on students' approaches to learning in an introductory food science and human nutrition course. *Journal of Food Science Education, 19*(2), 59–73. doi: [10.1111/1541-4329.12180](https://doi.org/10.1111/1541-4329.12180).
- Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1998). *Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory*. London: Sage.
- Trigwell, K., Ellis, R. A., & Han, F. (2012). Relations between students' approaches to learning, experienced emotions, and outcomes of learning. *Studies in Higher Education, 37*(7), 811–824. doi: [10.1080/03075079.2010.549220](https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2010.549220).
- Vail, P. L. (1994). *Emotion: The on/off switch for learning*. New Delhi: Modern Learning Press.
- Velez, J. J., Moore, L. L., Bruce, J. A., & Stephens, C. A. (2014). Agricultural leadership education: Past history, present reality, and future directions. *Journal of Leadership Studies, 7*(4), 65–70. doi: [10.1002/jls.21307](https://doi.org/10.1002/jls.21307).
- Wadlinger, H. A., & Isaacowitz, D. M. (2006). Positive mood broadens visual attention to positive stimuli. *Motivation and Emotion, 30*(1), 87–99. doi: [10.1007/s11031-006-9021-1](https://doi.org/10.1007/s11031-006-9021-1).
- Watson, D., Clark, L. A., & Tellegen, A. (1988). Development and validation of brief measures of positive and negative affect: The PANAS scales. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 54*(6), 1063–1070. doi: [10.1037/0022-3514.54.6.1063](https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.54.6.1063).
- White, C. J. (2013). Higher education emotions: A scale development exercise. *Higher Education Research and Development, 32*(2), 287–299. doi: [10.1080/07294360.2012.674496](https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2012.674496).
- Wolfe, P. (2006). The role of meaning and emotion in learning. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education, 2006*(110), 35–41. doi: [10.1002/ace.217](https://doi.org/10.1002/ace.217).

Corresponding author

Haley Traini can be contacted at: haley.traini@oregonstate.edu