



Emotion and Education: Reflecting on the Emotional Experience

Emotion and Education

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Abstract: The paper presents an educative experience organized in a postgraduate course in a faculty of education with the aim of facilitating students' "affective self-understanding". Affective self-understanding is a reflective practice that allows people to comprehend their own emotions in order to gain awareness of them. Students were spontaneously engaged in a laboratory, where they were invited to reflect on their emotional lives. The educative experience was subdivided into different phases requiring writing and analysis tasks. At the end of the experience, students were asked what they thought they had learned, what had been difficult, and what had been the most important phase for learning. Students' answers were analyzed on the basis of grounded theory through an inductive process of analysis. The theoretical framework of the research is the cognitive theory of emotions. According to this theory, an emotional education is possible because we can understand emotions by identifying their cognitive component and the actions they induce.

Keywords: *Affective self-understanding, emotional education, cognitive theory of emotions, reflective experience, emotional life.*

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Introduction

This paper investigates the educative significance of "affective self-understanding" (Mortari, 2009a, 91 et seq.), which is a reflective practice that allows people to comprehend their own emotions in order to gain awareness of them. Considering an eidetic phenomenological perspective, I propose an original method of affective self-understanding (Husserl, 2012; Mortari, 2009a). To introduce this topic, it is important to explore the existent literature of studies that concern both the emotional experience and emotional education.

In its history, psychological research on emotions has investigated many aspects: accuracy in recognizing emotions (Buck, 1984; Campbell, Kagan, & Krathwall, 1971; Gross & Ballif, 1991; Rosenthal et al., 1979); communicating emotional expressions using the face (Hall, 1984); using words to describe feelings (Parker, Taylor, & Bagby, 1993); responding with empathy (Flury & Ickes, 2001); and managing emotions with self-regulating strategies (Thayer, Newman, & McClain, 1994).

The theme of emotion understanding, which is investigated in this paper in the form of emotion self-

understanding, has been explored especially by psychology. In particular, Pons, Harris, and Doudin (2002) reported on a Test of Emotion Comprehension (TEC), an instrument that evaluates the general level of emotion understanding by measuring nine components of emotion comprehension. Pons, Harris and de Rosnay summarized these components as follows: "recognition," "external cause," "desire," "belief," "reminder," "regulation," "hiding," "mixed," and "morality" (2004, 128-129). The authors considered how these components develop between three and 11 years and suggested that "it is helpful to think in terms of three developmental periods, each period being characterized by the consolidation of a particular mode of understanding (external, mentalistic, and reflective appraisal)" (*ivi*, 148).

From this kind of researches, we know the different developmental phases of emotion comprehension and we get an instrument for measuring the level of one person's emotion understanding, but we do not know enough about the educative gains that one person derives from understanding his/her own emotions. In order to gain insights about this specific issue, I organized an educative experience aimed at facilitating participants' affective self-understanding. Based on this

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educative activity, I developed a qualitative research study.

In the last decades, the emotional life has become an important object of study for education researchers. We can find research about teachers' emotional experience (Hargreaves, 2000; Day & Leitch, 2001; Isenbarger & Zembylas, 2006; Darby, 2008; Shapiro, 2010; Zembylas et al., 2011) or about the relationship between emotions and learning and achievement (Hannula, 2002; Hascher, 2010; Dettmers et al., 2011; Marchand & Gutierrez, 2012; Ahmed et al., 2013). Nowadays, the popular use of concepts such as "emotional literacy" and "social and emotional learning" (Liau et al., 2003; Zins & Elias, 2007; Perry, Lennie & Humphrey, 2008; Bierman et al., 2010; Durlak et al., 2011; Camilleri et al., 2012; Dracinski, 2012; Winans, 2012; Castillo et al., 2013; Rivers et al., 2013) highlights the existence of wide agreement on the importance of emotional education. However, we do not yet know enough about how one can organize an educative experience aimed at facilitating participants' affective self-understanding. In order to fill this gap, I propose the use of a new instrument, which I call the "journal of emotional life." It is a diary in which the learner writes daily about his/her experience of the self-investigation of his/her emotional life. The educative assumption grounding this experience is that the daily writing increases the capability to reflect on one's inner experience and, in particular, on one's emotional experience, and then to gain a meaningful comprehension of it.

In the following paragraphs, I will explain the theoretical framework that I believe gives sense to the intention to do research on emotional education, and in particular, on the theme of affective self-understanding. Then I will present the qualitative design of the study, focusing attention on the educative use of the journal of emotional life. The findings presented at the end of the article highlight what participants learnt from the educative experience, what they found difficult, and which phase of the experience they considered to be most important for learning.

Theoretical Framework

I think that educational research should start from a real and significant question, and a significant question emerges when the researcher thinks through the problematic nature of the educative experience by dialoguing with significant theories.

A significant pedagogical theory is constituted by the Socratic perspective, which assumes the concept of care as the node of the pedagogical discourse; indeed, Socrates affirms that the main aim of education is to educate young people "to care for oneself." According to Socrates, to care for oneself implies, above all, to know oneself (Plato, *Alcibiades*, 129a). This is because knowing oneself is the necessary condition for having a human life.

But what does knowing oneself mean? If we accept as our starting point the ontological assumption

according to which the essence of our self is that immaterial substance created by the life of the mind, then knowing oneself is investigating the life of the mind.

The intellectual Cartesian perspective, which dominates in our culture, induces us to think that the life of the mind is made, basically, by the thoughts we think, which are both aware thoughts and tacit thoughts.

But by identifying the essence of the mind with its cognitive side, we forget another important component of mental life—that is, its emotional side. The emotional side of the mind, which expresses itself through emotions, sentiments, and moods, plays a very important role in human existence because it conditions our own way of being in the world.

According to Nussbaum, emotional life, like "geological upheavals," shapes the landscape of the life of the mind and thus shapes our social life, marking our living as "uneven" and "uncertain" (2001, 1).

In the early decades of the twentieth century, the phenomenon of emotional life became an important object of study for some phenomenologist philosophers. The authors who dealt particularly with this issue from a phenomenological perspective were Scheler and Stein.

Scheler stated that the "heart deserves to be called the core of man as a spiritual being much more than knowing and willing do" (1973, 100). He also added that "man, before he is an *ens cogitans* or an *ens volens*, is an *ens amans*" (ivi, 110-111). Stein also highlights the importance of the heart, that is to say the importance of the emotional side of the life of the mind in the life of a human being. She writes that "even though the heart signifies the bodily organ to whose activity bodily life is tied, we have no difficulty in picturing the heart as the inner being of the soul, because it is evidently the heart that has the greatest share in the inner processes of the soul, and because it is in the heart that the interconnection between body and soul is most strikingly felt and experienced" (2002, 437-438).

Furthermore, when we deal with the topic of emotional life, we cannot avoid considering Heideggerian thought. After all, Heidegger was the philosopher who paid particular attention to emotional life maintaining its existential primacy. Indeed, he affirms that the phenomenon of mood is a "fundamental existential," since "Da-sein is always already in a mood" (1996, 126). Even if the moods remain unnoticed, they "are by no means nothing ontologically" (*ibidem*), because the moods are what "makes manifest 'how one is and is coming along'" (ivi, 127).

If emotions play a prominent role in life, then education, which finds its reason for being in facilitating human flourishing, cannot avoid being concerned with the emotional side of life in order to allow the educative subject to contribute to the promotion of his/her emotional well-being. Given this

theoretical assumption, then learning to care for oneself implies also caring for the emotional life; since a fundamental part of caring is knowing oneself, and the act of knowing implies also thinking over the emotions we feel, consequently educating a person to care for himself/herself is educating that person to understand the emotional life of the mind.

At this point, a vital pedagogical question is the following: how can pedagogical discourse face up to the issue of an education on emotional life? In order to answer this question, it is necessary to develop an adequate theory of emotional education. This implies finding theories of emotions that can be a reference for the construction of the pedagogical discourse about emotions.

Cognitive Conception of Emotions

For a long time in our culture, an irrational conception of emotion prevailed. Indeed, the belief according to which “emotions are ‘non-reasoning movements,’ unthinking energies that simply push the person around” (Nussbaum, 2001, 24), still prevails.

The non-cognitive theory conceives of emotions as merely physical phenomena, not mental. It is true that emotions have a physical aspect, but that doesn’t leave out their mental side. Thinking that emotions, as physical phenomena, are unrelated to one’s mental side is to be subjected to the ancient mind/body dualism, which induces reductionist reasoning. Framed this way, it is impossible to conceive of an education about emotional life.

Recently, psychological and philosophical thinking developed an adversarial perspective that conceives of emotions as infused by a cognitive component; this cognitive perspective will be the reference for our discourse.

Salovey and Mayer (1990) speak of “emotional intelligence” and hold that the skills that configure this kind of intelligence can be measured. In the last years, the idea of the existence of an “emotional intelligence” has been largely explored in the literature. This has delved into several objects of study, such as academic performance and deviant behavior at school (Petrides, Frederickson & Furnham, 2004), experiential learning (Abe, 2011), psychological resilience to negative life events (Armstrong, Galligan & Critchley, 2011), mindfulness and subjective well-being (Schutte & Malouff, 2011), stress process (Schneider, Lyons & Khazon, 2013), and many others.

However, this sort of research is not interesting from a pedagogical perspective, which is founded on Socratic theory. If we accept the ideas that education is a practice of care and that caring for oneself requires knowing oneself, then the aim of pedagogical research concerning emotions should not be that of finding criteria for measuring emotional intelligence in relation to several objects of study. Rather, it should aim to find methods and instruments aimed at

supporting people to gain an adequate comprehension of their emotional life.

Relevant to this end is Oatley’s cognitive theory (1992), which affirms that emotions are not irrational phenomena since they have an underlying cognitive component, even if—as of many other aspects of the mental life—we are not always aware of them. The cognitive component of emotions is made by appraisals that we work out with regards to the events we experience; it is postulated that emotions are consequent to the appraisal we work out. The nucleus of Oatley’s theory, which is useful for the purpose of formulating a theory of emotional education, is the following: emotion is a mental state grounded on an appraisal of one’s experience. It has a specific phenomenological aspect that, when we analyze the emotion, must be distinct from the elicitive conditions of the emotion and from the resulting actions.

Furthermore, discursive psychology highlights the idea of a close connection between emotions and their cognitive components. In this perspective, “emotion feelings and displays” are treated as “being psychologically equivalent to statements” (Harré & Gillett, 1994, 145-146).

Regarding the field of philosophy, Solomon notes that “the cognitive theory has become the touchstone of all philosophical theorizing about emotion, for or against” (2003, 1).

An interesting philosophical theory that embraces a cognitive conception of emotions is the neo-Stoic perspective proposed by Nussbaum. On the basis of a profound study of ancient philosophy, she affirms that emotions are infused by thoughts. Specifically, she maintains that emotions are “intelligent responses to the perception of value” (Nussbaum, 2001, 1).

She writes: “Emotions always involve thought of an object combined with thought of the object’s salience or importance; in that sense, they always involve appraisal or evaluation” (*ivi*, 23).

More precisely still an emotion embodies a thought about an object, and this thought is constituted by a propositional content of an evaluative kind as regards the object; this evaluation exerts a performative power on the way of being of the person. The emotions “embody not simply ways of seeing an object, but beliefs – often very complex – about the object” (*ivi*, 28).

In this regard, Nussbaum specifies that “severing emotion from belief, it severs emotion from what is not only a necessary condition of itself, but also a part of its very identity” (*ivi*, 30).

The beliefs about things we conceive of as important with regard to one’s well-being produce evaluative thoughts, and these appraisals generate emotions.

If we follow Aristotle (*Rhetoric*, book II, 1378a 20-22; *Nicomachean Ethics*, book II, 1104b 14-15), emotions are subdividable essentially into two categories:

positive and negative. When a thought evaluates an experience in a negative way, it generates negative emotions like grief; however, when a thought is evaluated in a positive way, it then generates a positive emotion, such as delight.

If beliefs are constituent parts of an emotion, then it means that one's emotional life can be the object of a rational understanding.

Heidegger identified the close connection between emotion and thinking; indeed, he affirms that "the two equiprimordially constitutive ways to be there" are in attunement and understanding and that attunement and understanding "are equiprimordially determined by *discourse*" (1996, 126). It is interesting that to be in a mood is a primordial "existential way to be" (*ibidem*) that is in relationship with understanding and determined by discourse. If so, mood is not an irrational phenomenon—that is, a phenomenon which manifests itself outside the rational side of the mind—but rather, it is determined by discourse. Thus, it is a rational phenomenon, and as such, it can become the object of a process of understanding.

Once we acknowledge that emotional life is suffused with thoughts, meaning that it has "rich cognitive/intentional content" (Nussbaum, 2001, 11), it is possible to assume that the emotions are objects of a reflective process through which, by investigating their thoughtful component, one can reach an understanding of them.

If opting for a non-cognitive theory of emotions excludes the emotional life as an object of a rational educative process, then we may instead assume a "cognitive/evaluative theory of emotions" (*ivi*, 3). This legitimizes the conception of experiences aimed at including emotions into the processes of a reflection that aims at understanding.

Principles for an Education about "Reflecting on Emotions"

"If emotions are just unthinking forces that have no connection with our thoughts, evaluations, or plans" (*ivi*, 26-27), then no education could be possible. We would be destined to suffer the violent power that emotions exert—a person would be like a raft cast adrift, prey to the "invading currents of some ocean" (*ivi*, 27). Instead, the cognitive theory of emotions implies that education is possible because we can understand emotions by identifying their cognitive components and the actions they induce. Starting from this understanding, we can then carry out a critical evaluation of both the intra-subjective and the social consequences of the emotion and eventually change our way of being by working on the cognitive content that it implies.

If an emotional education is thusly possible, then the pedagogical question is: what educative experiences is it important to give to students?

On the basis of the cognitive theory of emotions, I hypothesized that it is important to give educative

experiences in which students can develop the disposition to *stop* their involvement in daily actions *and think* about their emotional lives. Then they may learn personal methods for deeply investigating them.

Some pedagogical principles ground the process of conceiving this kind of educative experience. Above all, the starting point of the education, in order to facilitate the comprehension of oneself, can be nothing other than experience. Indeed, as Nussbaum highlights, "scientists who investigate the emotions typically rely on their subjects' (and their readers') ability to identify experientially instances of a given emotion, and to name them pretty reliably" (*ivi*, 9). Starting from the neo-Stoic view of Nussbaum, it is important to investigate the cognitive attitudes involved in emotion: that is, to reveal its propositional content (*ivi*, 5).

Since the educative aim consists of promoting and enhancing the capacity to understanding one's lived emotions, it is necessary to require the students to practice self-examination (*ivi*, 9).

The method for this analysis of the inward experience is suggested by phenomenology.

Phenomenology is basically a method that should allow the mind to grasp the essence of the flows of conscience; the act of grasping is carried out by bringing one's gaze to bear on the mental phenomenon in order to describe it. The essential quality of the phenomenological method is to be a description: "All its knowledge is descriptive" (Husserl, 2012, 144). Each person has flows of conscience, but that doesn't mean that they have them in their gaze (*ivi*, 149)—that is, that they are aware of them. In order that the flow of conscience from an unreflective condition can become an object of aware thinking, the mind must activate the reflective act. When the mental flows become the object of the reflective gaze, the mind can practice the method of description on them.

When Husserl conceives the phenomenological method, he takes as his reference the conscience in general, which he defines as the continuous flowing of mental phenomena. Pfänder (2002) instead pays attention directly to the emotional side of the mind. By aiming at a scientific knowledge of the sentiments, the author affirms that this science has the necessity of grounding itself on a "phenomenology of sentiments" (*ivi*, 118), which must pursue the direct grasping of the psychic phenomenon and give the most faithful possible description of it. Through the faithful description of the phenomenon, it is possible to accede to a "fundamental knowledge of the soul" (*ibidem*).

We have no doubts that it is arduous to realize a direct intuition of the phenomenon so that a faithful description becomes possible; however, since this is the condition for grounding a rigorous knowledge of emotions, it is useless to contest the possibility of this cognitive act before we deal with this aim.

Research design

The Educative Experience to Investigate

In the educational field we can find two kinds of approaches to research: an explorative research and a transformative research (Mortari, 2007, 13; 2009b, 52-53). Explorative research limits itself to investigate the reality as it is; transformative research engages itself in promoting new kinds of experiences and assumes them as object of inquiry (Mortari, 2009b).

The research presented in this paper is transformative. It foresees the organization of a significant educative experience with the aim of developing affective self-understanding. In a post-graduate course in an Italian faculty of education, I organized a group of 39 students who spontaneously engaged in a reflective experience on their emotional lives; indeed, naturalistic inquiry requires the research design should not modify the natural context of the research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

The phases of the educative experience are the following:

(1) *Writing the emotional identity card*

Through daily experience, we embody in our conscience some emotions, and in new situations that we perceive as similar to those we already lived, we tend to react by applying appraisals that are constituent parts of past emotions. This kind of behavior tends to occur in an unreflective way, and when we do not reflect on our emotions, we live as if we were driven and pushed by something external rather than in the frame of our emotional biography. Thus, we don't live fully. Given this possible and problematic situation, it becomes necessary from the pedagogical standpoint to learn to compose one's own emotional biography because involving oneself in the analysis of one's emotional profile means gaining awareness.

On this assumption, the students were required to create their *emotional identity card*. Once written, they had to read and analyze it in order to identify the critical nodes and reflect on these to search for possible paths of *work on oneself* from the perspective of provoking changes. So after some time, the card had to be redone. The emotional identity card is not something that can be written only once; rather, it has to be continually rewritten.

(2) *Making a conceptual analysis of emotional life*

In the second phase, the students were required to elaborate on a conceptual distinction as regards their sentiments, emotions, and moods. It is not always easy to draw a fine line of discrimination among these closely related experiences since "the distinctions are slippery, and some cases may be indeterminate" (Nussbaum, 2001, 9, note 7), but it is important to practice one's capacity for discriminating the different qualities of the emotional experience in order to facilitate the process of understanding it. This phase foresaw two activities. The first was an individual task in which each student had to find the specific qualities of emotions, sentiments, and moods. Then in the second phase, the students, who were organized into small groups, were required to confront and critically analyze

their individual products of reflection in order to elaborate a shared conceptual definition.

(3) *Writing one's emotional experience*

The third phase of the laboratory—which is the most important from the perspective of self-training—consisted of writing the *journal of their emotional life*. After the type of activity was proposed to the students, the epistemological frame of the activity was explained, and then the task was assigned.

- *Epistemological frame:* phenomenology states that what appears to the awareness is a phenomenon, and that describing a phenomenon is the way to accede to the comprehension of its essence; because interior life can also be conceived of as a phenomenon, then the emotional life can be described in order to reach understanding of it.

- *Task:* on the basis of these phenomenological premises, the task was formulated thus: "*Develop an interior observation to describe your emotional life as it appears, and then write your reflections in a journal designated as 'the journal of emotional life.'*" That means the students were involved in monitoring themselves in order to grasp the essence of the emotional life.

The writing phase consists of the following three parts:

(3a) The students were asked to write in their emotional journal every day. Specifically, they had to *describe* the lived emotions. This reflection could assume the shape of a *reflection-in-emotion*, which occurs when, by perceiving to be living an emotional state, we stop and think of it while it flows, and thus we describe it. However, it can also assume the shape of *the reflection-on-emotion*, which occurs when, in a state of relaxation at the end of the day, we reflect on our inward experience and describe it. At this moment of the educative experience, students did not receive specific instructions for self-examination. This phase of writing lasted a week.

(3b) The second phase required analyzing one's writing. This analysis consisted of re-reading the lived emotions in order to do the following: (i) identify the quality of the emotions which were described; (ii) identify the cognitive content of the emotions; and (iii) identify the externalizations, both private and public, which generally follow an emotion. The analytic phase lasted a week.

(3c) After the analysis phase, the students started to write in the journal again on the basis of the same criteria which were applied in the first phase. This third phase also lasted a week.

(4) *Reflecting on the educative experience*

When the experience ended, the students were given some questions with the aim of enhancing a critical reflection about this educative experience.

The questions were these:

- What do I think I have learned?

- What has been difficult?
- What was the most important phase for learning?

During the experience, we organized some group discussions in order to give some kind of scaffolding to the process. We did this because in previous explorative research it had emerged that reflection on the emotional life is a difficult task, and as such, it requires that the students be supported during the activity.

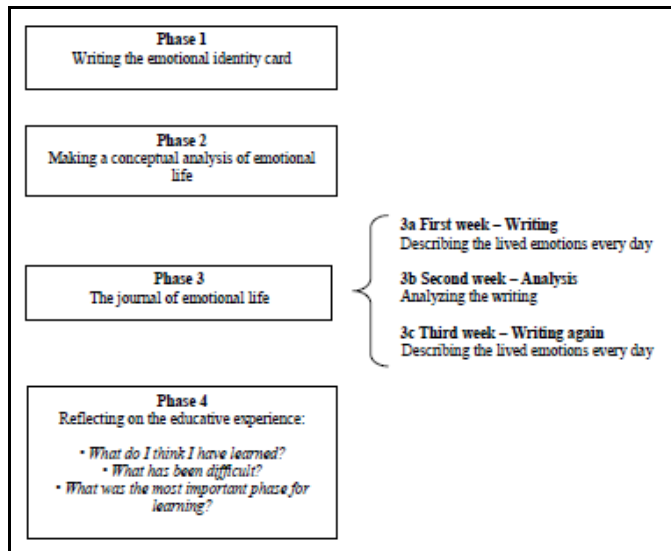


Figure 1. The educative experience

Collected Data

There are two kinds of material to investigate: the journals and the conclusive reflections. All the journals and the papers of the reflections were gathered at the end of the experience and transcribed *verbatim*.

I think that the more interesting data are the conclusive reflections because the educative significance of this experience emerges from them. Therefore, the process analysis takes as its object the students' reflections about their lived experience. From the perspective of the participatory research, it is possible to maintain that making the subjects responsible for the evaluation of the experience is essential to obtaining a meaningful and valid evaluation of it.

Method of Analysis

On the basis of the grounded theory, we worked out an inductive process of analysis that consists of approaching the reflections without preconceived procedures of analysis in order to construct one which is faithful to the quality of this precise material. This inductive, grounded method implies repeated readings of the reflections in order to do the following:

- identify, in the answers given to the questions, the significant reflections;
- label any reflections;
- group similar labels and find a category for each group.

The reference to grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Glaser, 1978; Strauss & Corbin, 1990) in this type of research is justified because even though it is a method originally developed in sociological research, nowadays it is considered applicable also in different fields of research.

Findings

The research is of an exploratory kind without any generalizing aim.

Below are the findings that emerged from the analysis of the answers given to the different questions asked of the students. The following findings are a discursive elaboration of the categories and the labels, which are highlighted in the tables of findings presented at the end of the article (see Appendix).

1) *What do I think I have learned?*

Analyzing the answers given to the first question, it is possible to say that students thought they had learned the following:

- To know themselves better.* In particular, students had learned to reach awareness of themselves, to reach a more precise image of themselves, to understand the most intimate part of themselves, and to know unforeseen aspects of themselves.
- To remain with themselves.* In particular, students had learned to listen to themselves, to pay attention to themselves, and to look inside themselves.
- To develop the posture of reflection (mindfulness).* In particular, through this experience, reflecting had become an active habit and an act that went deep, and students had learned to reflect on the practical implications produced by their lived emotions.
- To recognize the emotions.*
- To understand the quality of their emotional lives.* Regarding the emotional life, students had understood in particular its complexity, its importance in their way of being, its performative power on being, and its degree of relevance.
- A method for self-examination.*
- To accept parts of themselves.* In particular, students had learned to accept negative emotions and the experience of suffering.
- To transform their gaze on themselves.* In particular, students had learned to place less emphasis on the negative, to be more critical, and to have a gaze outside themselves.
- To act on their emotional lives to transform their own being.* In particular, students had learned to modify their externalizations, to better manage themselves, and to not demand an impossible control of things.
- A new emotional posture.* In particular, students had learned to have faith and compassion.

m) *To discover the value of writing.* In particular, students discovered the formative and therapeutic value of writing.

What did I learn from carrying out the analysis?

Some students, reflecting on the cognitive dynamics activated in the third phase, discovered what they had learned from the second phase; these were spontaneous reflections, not explicitly requested.

In particular, students had learned to *describe* and to *redimension the emphasis they tend to give to certain emotions*. Furthermore, in the third phase, they realized *more analytic and detailed writing* in consequence of the fact that the technique of analysis continued to act in their minds even after the second phase was finished.

2) *What has been difficult?*

Analyzing the answers given to the second question, it is possible to say that students encountered difficulties in the following activities:

- a) *In talking about themselves.*
- b) *In stopping themselves in order to think.*
- c) *In putting forth the cognitive effort required.*
- d) *In finding the emotional experience being lived.*
- e) *In grasping the essence of emotional life.*
- f) *In acquiring awareness of the self.*
- g) *In carrying out the reflection on action.*
- h) *In doing the analysis.* In particular, students encountered difficulties on the cognitive plane. For them, it was difficult to find the underlying beliefs, to return to the antecedents of the emotional act, to find the externalizations, to find the beliefs and the externalizations, to make regular analysis, and to bear what emerges in consequence of the fact that the analysis went deep and took away all the hidden veils.
- i) *In the third phase—that is, writing again.* In particular, after the analysis it was more difficult to express their emotions. Furthermore, after the analysis, the words seemed inadequate.
- l) *In writing.* In particular, students encountered difficulties in stopping and writing, in writing about themselves, in writing regularly, and in bearing with the effect of writing since writing gives consistency to feeling.
- m) *In succeeding in describing.* The cognitive act of describing was difficult because their minds tended to make a narration. In particular, it was difficult to describe the positive emotional experience being lived. Furthermore, it was difficult for them to find the words for describing the phenomenon faithfully.
- n) *In not having a given method to follow for self-examination, but rather having to construct one.*

o) *In accepting what the analysis brought to light in the awareness.* In particular, students had difficulty in accepting negative sentiments that they had, up until then, believed to be extraneous to themselves. It was difficult for them to listen to themselves regarding the painful aspects of themselves and to accept their own being.

3) *What was the most important phase for learning?*

The answers given to the third question were subdivided as follows:

- a) Thirty-four students picked *the analysis phase*. In their opinion, this phase was important because it allowed them to reach self-awareness, to comprehend the complexity of their emotional lives, and to find a new gaze for their inward experience. Furthermore, it increased their reflective capacity.
- b) Two students picked *the phase in which they started to write in their journals again*. In their opinion, writing again after the analysis produced faith in themselves and facilitated their concentration on themselves.
- c) Only one student answered that *all of the phases without distinction* were equally important.
- d) Two students picked the *group's discussion*.

Discussion and Conclusion

Since “emotional illiteracy” (Goleman, 2006, 231) seems to be an increasingly widespread phenomenon in contemporary society, one of the most important and urgent educational tasks is to propose experiences that offer people opportunities to reflect on their emotional life, in order to gain awareness of it.

The educative experience presented was organized starting from the theoretical framework of the cognitive conception of emotions, with particular reference to Nussbaum's neo-Stoic theory and Oatley's cognitive theory and with reference to the phenomenological method (Husserl). This theoretical framework is particularly useful because it suggests learning devices that facilitate the development of emotional awareness. In their conclusive reflections, participants recognized the great educational value of this experience. Therefore, it is important to discuss at least three elements that emerged from the data: the connection between self-understanding and self-transformation, the value of the writing, and the importance of the analysis.

Self-understanding and self-transformation

In particular, the answers given by students to the first question highlight that they have acquired competences not only at the level of self-understanding but also at the level of self-transformation.

Since one's own emotions and personality are strongly connected, the practice of affective self-understanding leads people to reach a better understanding of their being with others in the world.

Students recognized that emotions have an ontogenetic consistency and a performative power, because they give to one's personality its specific characterization and they condition one's choices and acts.

Hence, they also recognized that emotions influence every event of one's personal life and have implications on one's specific way of relating to other people. For example, one participant writes: "I learned...to reflect about what my feelings produce in myself and in my relating to others." Another student says: "Only during this laboratory I have succeeded in thinking of emotions as something that affects every single event of my life and my day, of my staying in the reality. Furthermore, all of this has had repercussions on my way of relating with others."

From an educational point of view, this sort of awareness is very fruitful because it leads people to understand the importance of managing their own emotions in order to improve the quality of their personal and relational life. In explaining what he has learnt from the experience, a student says: "Now it is easier to identify my states of being and (...) to succeed in managing them, controlling them, and foreseeing their consequences."

In trying to reach a greater awareness of the emotional side of their mind, students were engaged in the practice of the phenomenological method. They were required to find a time for thinking in the midst of daily actions and then to activate a reflection aimed at describing and grasping the essential quality of their emotional lives. It is important to note that reflection and description are activities that can be contaminated by hidden forms of self-deception, especially when, during the exercises of self-analysis, participants encounter emotions or beliefs that are incoherent with the image that they have of themselves. For this reason, Husserl's "*principle of all principles*" (Husserl, 2012, 43) should be accompanied by the virtue of honesty regarding those emotions and beliefs that participants do not like to feel and think. Husserl's principle affirms "that every primordial dator Intuition is a source of authority (*Rechtsquelle*) for knowledge, that whatever presents itself in 'intuition' in primordial form (as it were in its bodily reality), is simply to be accepted as it gives itself out to be, though only within the limits in which it then presents itself" (*ibidem*).

Only in the light of this honesty, can an exercise of affective self-understanding have a real transformational effect, because it can be considered as a real concretization of the effort to know oneself in order to care for oneself.

The value of the writing

The answers given by students to the first and second questions highlight that even if the writing activity seems difficult for them, they recognize its significant value. Some of the major difficulties that participants encountered during the research were connected to the practice of writing down their emotions: for example, for them it was difficult not only to write

regularly, but also to find words to define what they felt, and to describe their affective experience.

Nevertheless, during this "educative laboratory", some participants learnt to use the writing in a formative and therapeutic way. Regarding the first qualification (formative), the following example seems to be particularly explicative: "I think I have learned a different way to use writing, not only as a mere instrument of outburst when emotions and thoughts were too dense to be contained, but also as a means of discovery and research through which I can give voice and form to my emotional life, as a gaze on my being." Regarding the second qualification (therapeutic), another example appears to be significant: "In some moments it seemed to me also that I felt better thanks to writing, because putting experiences and emotions on a piece of paper often gives relief and a strong sense of peace."

The diary used in this experience can be considered an educative instrument since the practice of writing helped students reflect on their emotional life in order to gain awareness of it.

Some answers given by the students suggest that in phase "3c" some of the initial difficulties that they encountered with writing were overcome due to the practice of analysis required during phase "3b". After the analysis, some students found less difficulties in describing and they were able to produce more analytic and detailed writing. The following quotes can give evidence of this point: "With regard to phase C, I can say that, while writing, I perceived the sensation of being more quiet and relaxed. I have had less trouble finding the right words to describe my emotional experiences, and I realized to be faster and, at the same time, more precise in the writing. Furthermore, compared to phase A, I realized that the description of emotional phenomenon are less surrounded by narrative parts;" "With regard to the restarting of the journal, I noticed that I was mentally proceeding according to the structure of the analysis."

Nevertheless, it is also significant to note that a minority of students said that in phase "3c" they encountered more major difficulties than in phase "3a" at the level of expressing emotions and finding the appropriate words: "The hardest part was the third; I felt stuck without understanding why;" "I found it a bit more difficult than I had before to define what an emotion was. [...] Suddenly, every word that came to my mind was no longer looking appropriate; I looked for other words but often vainly."

The importance of analysis

Reading students' answers to the third question, it can be seen that for the majority of them, the most interesting phase for learning was phase "3b" – the phase of the analysis of their journal.

Thanks to this phase, some participants acquired a better awareness of themselves, of the complexity of their emotional life, and of their inward experience.

Furthermore, some students pointed out that the analysis had increased their reflective capability. To explain these points, the following examples of what students say about the analysis are presented: "It is precisely at that moment that I became aware of how my being behaves and reacts with respect to emotional phenomena;" "It was also very interesting to discover the always-different interweaving between certain feelings;" "It has increased my capacity for reflection and my personal knowledge...The analysis has also obligated me to reflect on troublesome truths that put into crisis the idea I had of myself."

During phase "3b", students received some instructions for analyzing their diaries: (i) identify the quality of the emotions which were described; (ii) identify the cognitive content of the emotions; and (iii) identify the externalizations, both private and public, which generally follow an emotion. Reading the students' conclusive reflections, I find that difficulties were encountered with each one of these actions. Nevertheless, starting from the instructions given to them, participants learnt a method not only to analyze what they had *written* about their emotional life but also to analyze their emotional life *in itself*. A student writes: "I think I have learned a methodology to be able to handle what I feel, to succeed in understanding what I feel, from where it comes, and what can derive from it;" "By now, thinking in the way I have learned to think during the analysis of the journal has become habitual."

Due to the educative experience presented in this paper, participants learnt to reflect on their emotional life by acting directly on themselves by first being required to act on their diaries.

The findings of the analysis phase could be a promising starting point for future research aimed at developing and evaluating some methods and instruments that can facilitate the affective self-understanding of people of different ages.

The challenge is to invent, realize, and study programs that incorporate the educative experience that was developed in this research on affective self-investigation.

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Appendix

The tables of findings are presented below. In order to simplify the reading of the tables, the left column contains only a *selection* of the more considerable reflections. In the central column, there are the different labels, and in the right column there are the categories for the different groups of similar labels.

Table 1. *Findings from the first question: "What do I think I have learned?"*

Reflections	Labels	Categories
"To reach a greater awareness of myself, my inner life, and my feelings."	<i>I.1.1 Reaching awareness</i>	I.1 Knowing oneself better
"It has been a fundamental method to know myself more deeply, without taking for granted many aspects of my inner world. Discovering my person, I have understood which are the prevailing emotions and the dominant forms of externality."	<i>I.1.2 Reaching a more precise image of oneself</i>	
"Understanding the most intimate side of themselves."	<i>I.1.3 Understanding the most intimate part of oneself</i>	
"It was also useful to notice that...I often have very lively mood swings."	<i>I.1.4 Knowing unforeseen aspects of oneself</i>	
"There is more order; it seems to me that now the emotion is more a part of myself. I accept it, I listen to it, and sometimes I wait for it...I learned to listen, and to stop myself more often."	<i>I.2.1 Listening to oneself</i>	I.2. Remaining with oneself
"First of all, I have learned to pay more attention to what happens to me every day."	<i>I.2.2 Paying attention to oneself</i>	
"I have learned...to look inside myself...It was like seeing myself in the mirror, and discovering that I was in a mess, and wanting to fix everything...It makes no sense to build a false self, it is something that destroys you, that absorbs your every spontaneity, and that weighs you down..."	<i>I.2.3 Looking inside oneself</i>	
"Then, this work has been effective also when I find myself living an emotion or feeling because it is leading me to reflect and to immediately seek antecedents and manifestations. By now, thinking in the way I have learned to think during the analysis of the journal has become habitual. In this way, I seem to be able to live my emotional life more consciously and with greater thought."	<i>I.3.1 Reflecting becomes an active habit</i>	I.3 Developing the posture of reflection (mindfulness)
"I learned...to reflect about what my feelings produce in myself and in my relating to others."	<i>I.3.2 Reflecting on the practical implications produced by the lived emotions</i>	
"I think I have learned to focus more on my feelings and to go more in depth into things without stopping at the first impression."	<i>I.3.3 The act of reflection goes deep</i>	

Reflections	Labels	Categories
"I think I have learned to recognize my emotions."		I.4 Recognizing the emotions
"I have learned that it is not always easy to decipher one's own feelings and one's own emotional tone, and above all it is not easy to find the right words to name them. Furthermore, often different emotions are felt simultaneously and are reciprocally conflicting, and then the matter is further complicated."	<i>I.5.1 ...its complexity</i>	I.5 Understanding the quality of one's emotional life
"Before, I considered emotions to be something obvious and superficial. Most of the time I did not consider them at all, I did not give them any importance or meaning. Only during this laboratory I have succeeded in thinking of emotions as something that affects every single event of my life and my day, of my staying in the reality. Furthermore, all of this has had repercussions on my way of relating with others."	<i>I.5.2 ...its importance in one's way of being</i>	
"I have learned to pay more attention to what each emotion arouses in me"	<i>I.5.3 ...its performative power on being</i>	
"Explaining the problems and the feelings sometimes led me to realize that what I had felt in that moment had been exaggerated or, anyway, momentary; by spending time rationalizing the event, I realized that what that had happened to me was nothing so serious, and that emotions are strong but temporary."	<i>I.5.4 ...its degree of relevance</i>	
"I think I have learned a methodology to be able to handle what I feel, to succeed in understanding what I feel, from where it comes, and what can derive from it. Now, in the moment in which I feel something, I wonder about its origin. Particularly with regard to the non-positive feelings, I have become more conscious of their origin, and I have reflected for a long time on a methodology to be able to organize them. Often I still feel the need to write in my journal of emotions, especially when I feel strong anxiety and anger, in order to be able to better understand and handle from where they arise and what keeps them alive."		I.6 A method for self-examination
"I learned to relate in a different way with negative emotions. Whereas before I tried to silence them, I denied them, I wanted to annul them, now I try to live them and listen to them, even if this means living to the fullest the suffering and the pain."	<i>I.7.1 Accepting negative emotions</i>	I.7 Accepting parts of yourself
"I have seen and felt that looking inside me is not simple. Many times it also brings suffering."	<i>I.7.2 Accepting experiences of suffering</i>	
"In the first phase dedicated to the writing, I mainly described negative emotions: anger, agitation, tiredness with everything. Then after the phase dedicated to analysis, when I went back to writing in the journal I also began to see positive feelings."	<i>I.8.1 Placing less emphasis on the negative</i>	I.8 Transforming the gaze onto oneself
"All of this has led me to reflect more honestly...to be more critical of myself, to see the nuances, not just the distinct emotional colors. I called myself into question, and I realized I have to make a more critical analysis of consciousness rather than worrying about going deep without placing any judgment."	<i>I.8.2 Being more critical</i>	
"I tried to see the several situations which presented themselves to me from the viewpoints of the people around me."	<i>I.8.3 A gaze outside oneself</i>	

Reflections	Labels	Categories
"Through constant reflection on my 'inside,' I was able to more easily control the externalizations and to recognize immediately the roots of emotions."	<i>I.9.1 Modifying the externalizations</i>	I.9 Acting on emotional life to transform one's own being
"Now it is easier to identify my states of being and (...) to succeed in managing them, controlling them, and foreseeing their consequences."	<i>I.9.2 Being able to better manage oneself</i>	
"Now I'm striving not to demand that I always have control of everything and that things realize themselves in the way I imagine them."	<i>I.9.3 Not demanding an impossible control</i>	
"During the first draft of my identity card I wrote with a sense of discouragement and resignation. Now I am like in the first description, but my mind and my thoughts have more faith that I can improve. Beginning to know myself and analyzing my more tormented emotional states, I can improve."	<i>I.10.1 Having faith</i>	I.10 A new emotional posture
"Finally, I have learned to have compassion for my feelings; that is, to not want to judge myself as good or bad according to my feelings. This means loving myself."	<i>I.10.2 Having compassion</i>	
"I think I have learned a different way to use writing, not only as a mere instrument of outburst when emotions and thoughts were too dense to be contained, but also as a means of discovery and research through which I can give voice and form to my emotional life, as a gaze on my being..."	<i>I.11.1 The formative value</i>	I.11 Discovering the value of writing
"In some moments it seemed to me also that I felt better thanks to writing, because putting experiences and emotions on a piece of paper often gives relief and a strong sense of peace."	<i>I.11.2 The therapeutic value</i>	
"With regard to phase C, I can say that, while writing, I perceived the sensation of being more quiet and relaxed. I have had less trouble finding the right words to describe my emotional experiences, and I realized to be faster and, at the same time, more precise in the writing. Furthermore, compared to phase A, I realized that the description of emotional phenomenon are less surrounded by narrative parts."	<i>I.12.1 Describing</i>	I.12 What I have learned from carrying out the analysis
"In the third phase, I discovered that, without the analysis, emotions and feeling and thinking, and behaviors become overstated."	<i>I.12.2 Redimensioning the emphasis we tend to give to certain emotions</i>	
"With regard to the restarting of the journal, I noticed that I was mentally proceeding according to the structure of the analysis."	<i>I.12.3 Realizing a more analytic and detailed writing in consequence of the fact that the technique of analysis continued to act in the mind, even if the second phase was finished</i>	

Table 2. Findings from the second question: "What has been difficult?"

Reflections	Labels	Categories
"The greatest difficulty has been talking about myself."		II.1 Talking about oneself
"Stopping and listening to oneself is difficult and tiring. We are used to living on the run and acting more than to thinking and feeling."		II.2 Stopping oneself in order to think
"This work has been heavy because it requires a strong reflection that can bring out sides of one's character that one wanted to keep hidden. Re-elaborating some 'consciousness raising' is tiring."		II.3 In putting forth the cognitive effort required
"There were days when I didn't 'feel' anything, and giving a name to this 'anything' was not at all easy..."		II.4 Finding the emotional experience being lived
"Sometimes, my difficulties arose from the writing, as a tool not able to capture all the ideas that were running in my mind, to give them systematicity, an order, and to give priority to some ideas, rather than to others."		II.5 Grasping the essence of the emotional life
"Dealing with ourselves is never easy!...With this laboratory, I found myself often having to accept negative emotional phenomena, about which I had always preferred not to ask myself particular questions. This was, on a few occasions, cause of upheaval."		II.6 Acquiring awareness of the self
"Furthermore, there was an initial moment of difficulty with the drafting of the reflections on the day (reflection on action), because it involved more rationality than instinct (as it was in the reflection in action). Involuntarily, I felt myself kept under...It was as if I had to analytically write, as if I had been required to be colder."		II.7 Carrying out the reflection on action

Reflections	Labels	Categories
"It imposes considerable metacognitive work. It is not easy to return to a text and the experience linked to it, explore it, and then define it and bring it back in a small space on a sheet of paper."	<i>II.8.1 Difficulty on the cognitive plane</i>	II.8 Doing the analysis
"I found the work on 'belief' very hard because this word has triggered in me a process of rejection. The word 'belief' evokes in me the perception that behind what I feel there is something wrong to deconstruct and change."	<i>II.8.2 Finding the underlying beliefs</i>	
"...I encountered some difficulties in the analysis phase...This is because I could not simply and immediately reach the situational antecedent that gave rise within me to such sensation and reaction. It also has happened that I tried to persuade myself that I had found the antecedent, but I was neither secure nor convinced."	<i>II.8.3 Returning to the antecedents of the emotional act</i>	
"In the analysis, I have found great difficulty in tracing my public and private externalizations. In fact, most of the time I deducted them in a later phase, since they were not explicit in the text..."	<i>II.8.4 Finding the externalizations</i>	
"The phase of analysis was the most difficult because it is difficult to understand the cognitive content and then see the externalizations."	<i>II.8.5 Finding the beliefs and the externalizations</i>	
"It was difficult to stop every day to describe the emotions and the situation that had created them, the feelings, and the moods."	<i>II.8.6 Making regular analysis</i>	
"I found it difficult to always have a clear mind in dealing with a very personal work of analysis. Often I didn't feel able to do the analysis, but I could not do otherwise because there was not much time available. Other times, the difficulty arose from the kind of inner work required, which I was not always happy to do. Delivery was clear: we had to remove the veils that hide our emotions, the beliefs that give rise to them, and the reactions that we manifest."	<i>II.8.7 Bearing what emerges in consequence of the fact that the analysis goes deep and takes away all the hidden veils</i>	

Reflections	Labels	Categories
"The hardest part was the third; I felt stuck without understanding why."	<i>II.9.1 After the analysis, it was more difficult to express the emotions</i>	II.9 Third phase—that is, writing again
"The drafting of subsequent diaries was more synthetic, but also more selective in identifying the emotion to describe. I found it a bit more difficult than I had before to define what an emotion was. It also seemed to me that the language used later was less colorful, maybe even less appropriate from the grammatical point of view. Suddenly, every word that came to my mind was no longer looking appropriate; I looked for other words but often vainly."	<i>II.9.2 After the analysis, the words seemed inadequate</i>	
"It is fatiguing to stop and write what one really feels and thinks."	<i>II.10.1 Stopping and writing</i>	II.10 Writing
"I found some difficulties in the initial moments of drafting the diary. I was clumsy and insecure; I did not know what to write and how to write because it was a very personal topic (...) Then the drafting of the journal turned out to be easier than expected. I gradually let myself go, and I felt less and less of the initial embarrassment at the thoughts."	<i>II.10.2 Writing about oneself</i>	
"Primarily, it has been difficult to entrust to the written page what I felt. Firstly, because this meant giving a name to things. Giving names to things means to make them real, giving birth to them. But giving birth to something weighs, because it often means putting a face on something that one fears. It also means looking at a part or parts of oneself that one would not want to know—that is, recognizing them as a part of oneself. Consequently, it was difficult to find the words because it was like fighting against a self-censorship of the being. (...) Furthermore, being faithful to my existence has been difficult because I tend to downplay some of my feelings. I think this is also related to that cultural process through which feeling and emotions are downplayed. Before finding the words, I think that the difficulty has been to recognize the importance of certain emotions and to consider each feeling to be important and not being ashamed."	<i>II.10.3 Bearing with the effect of writing since writing gives consistency to feeling</i>	
"To compile the diary daily."	<i>II.10.4 Writing regularly</i>	

Reflections	Labels	Categories
"It has been difficult to searching for descriptions as I write. The greatest difficulty was in describing an emotion, because I did not know how to do it...For this, I dwelled on writing a lot because I believed that the more thoughts I put together, the more precise the description would be; then, I realized that it was a narration of flows of thought and there were very few descriptions."	<i>II.11.1 The cognitive act of describing is difficult; the mind tends to make a narration</i>	II.11 Succeeding in describing
"Another fact, which would seem to be shared by all, is the difficulty in the expression and analysis of positive emotions like happiness. A description of these states turns out to be extremely elusive because positive emotions would seem to stimulate a contemplative thought, while negative experiences lead more easily to an interrogative thinking."	<i>II.11.2 It is particularly difficult describing the positive emotional experiences being lived</i>	
"The biggest difficulty was in finding the words to express what I was feeling. Even if in the second part of the emotional description, the writing had been more fluid, I am sure that I will NEVER be able to find the most adequate and right words to express what I actually feel. It's like if, by translating my feeling into words, I trivialized it. I 'killed it.'"	<i>II.11.3 Finding the words to describe the phenomenon faithfully</i>	
"Not having to follow a given method of analysis, but rather having to build my own method has been difficult because I'm insecure."		II.12 Not having a given method to follow for self-examination, but rather having to construct one
"To accept some particularly negative feelings that suddenly exploded during the period of writing the diary, especially anger. This was a feeling that I had not even considered in the drafting of the individual identity card made at the beginning of the laboratory."	<i>II.13.1 Accepting negative sentiments up to then believed to be extraneous to oneself</i>	II.13 Accepting what the analysis brought to light in the awareness
"Then there have been times that my mind refused to listen too much to itself because the memories hurt."	<i>II.13.2 Listening to oneself regarding the painful aspects of oneself</i>	
"It's difficult to accept being as I am."	<i>II.13.3 Accepting one's own being</i>	

Table 3. Findings from the third question: "What was the most important phase for learning?"

Reflections	Labels	Categories
"The phase that I found most interesting is certainly the analysis of emotions. It is precisely at that moment that I became aware of how my being behaves and reacts with respect to emotional phenomena. Rationally addressing them has been difficult on the one hand, but on the other hand definitely useful; and it made me wonder, especially from the point of view of 'learning.' At that moment I found myself in front of my reality, and it was not always easy to understand the single elements of analysis and differentiate them from each other."	<i>III.1.1 It allowed self-awareness</i>	III.1 Phase of analysis
"It was also very interesting to discover the always-different interweaving between certain feelings. These often appeared together with new, diverse elements from which originated some different reflections on my experience."	<i>III.1.2 It allowed comprehension of the complexity of emotional life</i>	
"I realized how some experiences that I believed banal were, rather, full of meaning."	<i>III.1.3 It allowed a new gaze to be found for the inward experience</i>	
"It has increased my capacity for reflection and my personal knowledge...The analysis has also obligated me to reflect on troublesome truths that put into crisis the idea I had of myself..."	<i>III.1.4 It increased the reflective capacity</i>	
"The third phase has given me faith again. Faith that, in this case, is the opposite of discouragement, the discouragement that I have felt towards life. Now, I feel to drive my life and to be empowered. Since I want always to have the situation under control, it is really a good sensation."	<i>III.2.1 Writing again after the analysis produced faith in oneself</i>	III.2 Phase of starting to write in the journal again
"Maybe the most interesting phase, from the point of view of learning, was the third...The result was that I focused more on the emotional experiences, in an effort to describe rather than narrate. I wanted to focus more on a few things in order to analyze them in depth, instead of dragging from elements that are superficial and lacking of real relevance. (...) In some lines, I think I performed a kind of writing that I had never experienced, and that gave me a feeling of inner richness."	<i>III.2.2 Writing again after the analysis facilitated concentrating on oneself</i>	

Reflections	Labels	Categories
"I think that all three have been helpful in different ways. The first phase has allowed me to seek out and identify emotions and feelings and to understand which emotional tone prevails in my day. (...) The last phase was the fastest and most 'fun.' In fact, thanks to the work done previously, it was easier to describe my emotional life, and in a certain sense, I felt relieved when the words were written on the page."		III.3 All the phases without distinction
"During the laboratory, moments of discussion in the classroom were very important and rich in reflective starting points because even if there was no talk about something that concerned me directly, that which was said helped me understand some of the nuances of my feelings, and I think I can hypothesize that I gained a greater degree of empathy and knowledge of myself. The contributions opened up to me other paths of reflection, new points of observation."		III.4 The group's discussion