

## Unit 3

# Seeing Others from the Self

### Major principles

- Schools must make room for the self of the students.
- Learning depends in part on mirror neurons and our ability to simulate.
- Teachers' and students' goals must be aligned.
- Motivation to take moral action may derive from engaging in meaningful reflection about others' situations in relation to one's own.

This unit suggests some of the reasons that involving the self of the learner in schools may be important. Although traditional ideas about schooling may be embedded in the monkey-see, monkey-do cliché, research reveals that monkey only does if it understands what it sees—recognizes it as familiar and desirable. The mechanism for this recognition is our ability to simulate experience as if it were real. We use our complex cognitive and emotional abilities to imagine actions or solutions to problems and let them play out on our most primitive brain parts, those responsible for our physical survival, in order to feel their rightness or wrongness in our gut. What happens in the classroom will either invite the participation of the “real me,” the self, or it won't. If it doesn't, the intended learning may not occur: students may not notice the teacher's modeling or may notice but fail to engage in active, emotion-laden simulations. Modeling can be useful if the teacher and learners understand and share goals; even imitation can be useful, especially if used mindfully to induce simulation. Depending on how they are used, both techniques can succeed or fail at inviting the learner's self into the classroom.

As you move through these assignments, keep in mind the principles from this unit and remember Jill's voice (Unit 3, Section 6): “I just need a place where I can be myself.”

**Assignment 1:** Compose a letter to your department chair or an administrator in which you explain in your own words what it means to involve the self of students in your school and in your class.

Recall Hallie Cohen's challenge of trying to teach violin to a group of reluctant seventh graders (Unit 3, Section 3). Her approach to the problem of drawing the students into her lesson was an effective solution because she essentially tapped

into something that mattered to those students. She involved the students' self in the lesson.

In your letter, describe the behavior or other evidence that signals the involvement of the self of students. Be specific and use examples.

Then continue your letter either by:

1. Writing an idea you have for a lesson plan or for a larger systemic change that you would like to implement or see implemented in order to achieve the goal of making your school or classroom more inclusive of the students' self; or
2. Writing a full description of something you or your school already does to include the self of the students, and explain and illustrate how it succeeds and how it might be improved or expanded.

Work on this assignment either alone or with a colleague (producing one letter that you both create). Although the primary goals of this exercise are to help you make sense of this notion of the self and to help you begin to think about its relevance to education, you may probably find it most useful to make this a real letter that you actually send, discuss, and implement. (Eventually, you might consider trying to transform the letter into an essay that you publish.)

**Assignment 2:** Help your students build “skilled intuition.”

1. Read “Building smart students: A neuroscience perspective on the role of emotion and skilled intuition in learning,” Immordino-Yang and Faeth (See Resources: <http://www.learner.org/courses/neuroscience/resources/resources.html>).
2. Modify your lesson plans for a particular unit to explore how you might help your students build “skilled intuition,” or create a series of new lesson plans to achieve this goal.
3. Keep a log or journal of what you try and of the outcomes that most please you. If a particular lesson didn't work as you hoped, write about it: speculate on the reasons and see if you can redesign the idea. (This assignment will require a minimum of two hours to do the reading and planning. It will require unspecified additional hours to implement and document it in the classroom.)

**Assignment 3:** Imagine new school designs.

You'll notice that the essay “Building smart students” suggests some good strategies that have become fairly common—connecting material to student interests, solving open-ended problems, and creating a safe emotional environment. Try to think beyond these, and imagine fundamentally different school designs that might result from a different conception of how learning occurs (the ideas in this course). Let your

imagination roam to ideas about a new school system that supports new approaches to teaching. In other words, instead of limiting your thinking to what teachers can do in an imperfect system to motivate students, imagine the ingredients of a new system—one that nurtures student interest and curiosity and transforms it into deep motivation. If you find some ideas you like, identify some changes that would need to occur in order to convert your vision to reality. (Reminder: Don't let yourself become bogged down in what "will never work at my school.")

Write your thoughts and ideas in your journal.

**Assignment 4:** Analyze a case study.

*Case study: A pre-K teacher struggled with a student whose problem was lack of motivation for an activity he didn't like. It was a constant fight to keep him on task. His academic skills blossomed, yet his desire to complete the given assignment did not increase. At first, the teacher thought it was a lack of confidence. Maybe the student recognized that his fine motor skill was not where he wanted it to be, so perhaps he felt his work was substandard and allowed his focus to wander. The teacher tried everything. She worked one-on-one with the boy, used encouraging words to build confidence, discussed responsibility, and so on. She involved the boy's parents, as well—discussions about giving more responsibility at home—but nothing seemed to work. If he didn't want to do something, there wasn't anything the adults could say or do to effect improvement. It was evident that if he was excited by the activity, he did it with pleasure; but if any part of that activity did not interest him, his focus was derailed.*

Look at this problem through the lens of the ideas in this unit, including the idea of aligning emotional goals. What solutions might you try? Write your thoughts and ideas in your journal.

**Assignment 5:** Analyze the last paragraph of Unit 3, Section 6:

*"Schools constantly claim that producing good citizens is their mission, yet so many of the motivators remain external—grades, college-readiness, pleasing parents, and the ubiquitous fear factor. And conditions in the classroom tend not to foster meaningful reflection. Perhaps our ends and our means are not aligned. What do we mean by "good citizens"? Is neuroscience offering insight that might be useful to achieving this goal? Could it be giving us a glimpse into the survival and self-related processes underlying social behavior and creativity?"*

How might you answer the questions posed above—both in terms of the desire to develop moral citizens and in terms of developing creativity? Keep in mind Dr. Immordino-Yang's research into social emotions like admiration and compassion, and her discovery of the sort of inner-directed attention that preceded her volunteers' feeling that they should take some sort of action in their own lives. Recall John's description of his reaction in the study (Unit 3, Section 5).

**Assignment 6:** Revisit the teaching and learning problem you wrote about prior to the start of the course and analyze it from the perspective of what you have learned in the first three units about the role of emotion in learning.

Write down the answers to the following questions:

1. What new insight into the problem have you developed?
2. Can you imagine some specific solutions to try?

**Suggested readings between Unit 3 and Unit 4:**

Possible review:

Immordino-Yang, M.H. “The Smoke Around Mirror Neurons: Goals as Sociocultural and Emotional Organizers of Perception and Action in Learning.” *Mind, Brain, and Education* Vol. 2, Issue 2 (June, 2008): 67–73.

Immordino-Yang, M.H., and L. Sylvan. “Admiration For Virtue, Neuroscientific perspectives on a motivating emotion.” *Contemporary Educational Psychology* (2010).

Possible preview:

Immordino-Yang, M.H. “A Tale of Two Cases: Lessons for Education from the Study of Two Boys Living with Half Their Brains.” *Mind, Brain, and Education* Vol. 1, Issue 2 (June, 2007): 66–83.

Immordino-Yang, M.H., and K.W. Fischer. “Neuroscience bases of learning.” In V. G. Aukrust (Ed.), *International Encyclopedia of Education*, 3rd Edition, Section on Learning and Cognition. Oxford, England: Elsevier, 2009.