

Unit 2

The Unity of Emotion, Thinking, and Learning

Major principles

- Emotion is the rudder for thinking, learning, and decision-making.
- Motivation is rooted in emotional relevance.
- Meaningful learning requires three other ingredients: factual knowledge, skilled intuition, and understanding of rules or principles.
- The purpose of education is to develop students' abilities to recognize the complexities of situations and to help them create increasingly nuanced and sophisticated strategies for acting and responding.
- Young people must learn to feel their emotions and understand them.

This unit suggests that the essential connection between emotion and cognition requires that we rethink how we look at students' motivation, their ability to solve problems, and the schools we have designed for them. Some of the behavior and learning problems that teachers confront in the classroom may take on new meaning when examined through the lens of this connection. As you go through these assignments, keep this connection and the principles from the unit in mind.

Assignment 1: Analyze a case study.

Case study: A high school math teacher wants his students to take more control of their learning and be more reflective about it. He wants them to develop the skills necessary to examine their learning strategies and change them if they are not effective. The students are satisfied with a superficial attempt at learning. They consider that, if they complete one or two problems, they have achieved mastery and are reluctant to practice further. Their concern is more about their grade than their learning.

Analyze this problem through the lens of the role of emotion in learning. Write down the answers to the following questions:

1. What possible solutions does your analysis suggest?
2. What might you do to implement a solution?
3. Are there obstacles to implementing your solution?
4. If so, how might you deal creatively with these?

Assignment 2: View and discuss the video “Depth of Field.”

Pay attention to the ways in which Eric Baylin and his students talk about photographs. As a photographer, Eric talks like an expert. However, once they begin to understand depth of field, his student novices also start talking like photographers, an indication that they are beginning to think like artists. Look for these moments when you hear students beginning to think like artists.

Write down the answers to the following questions:

1. What does it mean to “think like” an expert in the subject that you teach—to think like an historian, a writer, a mathematician?
2. How might you begin to develop this ability in your students?
3. What might be the greatest impediment to your success?

Note: This is a two-hour assignment. If you view and discuss the video in your group with your facilitator, one hour will be part of your contact hours, and the other hour can be homework; or the entire assignment can be homework. If it is all done as homework, try to view the video and discuss it with a colleague; or, if you watch it alone, write about your observations in your journal.

Assignment 3: Analyze a case study.

Some of the most difficult classroom problems have complex emotional roots. The case study below is one of those. Because you won’t have all the emotional and family information to do a definitive analysis, you should draw whatever inferences you can. Your assignment is to analyze the boy’s behavior and the teacher’s response and to suggest possible courses of action that you might take or what you might have done differently early on. As you read the case, keep in mind that we all have emotional triggers.

Case study: “Last year, I had a new student who had moved to town in the middle of the year. During faculty meetings before his arrival, we were advised that he was a very troubled 12-year-old who had had a difficult time with authority, tended to become violent, and really struggled with school. His one redeeming quality, however, was that he was very artistic and loved to draw. I felt like the lucky one on our staff because I was going to be the one who could boost this student’s self-esteem, make him realize his talents and potential, and ultimately save him from what seemed to be certain up-hill battles in every other area of his life.

“Our first assignment together was a study of the style of Art Nouveau artist, Gustav Klimt. The students were to use colored pencils and, in the style of Klimt, draw from observation of a live model. They were asked to pay close attention to the face and hands, giving as much detail as possible, and the rest could be implied. The Klimt style

shows a lot of pattern and color, and students were asked to show these in their work, as well.

“My new student had a fabulous start, drawing the model in excellent proportion. He had really grasped the concept of foreshortening and was working quickly—much faster than the rest of the class. I made a point of complimenting specific elements of his drawing, and announced to the class how lucky we were to have had such a talented young artist move to our town. I showed his drawing to the class to point out some of his acute details in the face and hands.

“The next day, students went right to work on their drawings again. As I walked around conferencing with different students, I found that I didn’t check in as much with my new student because he seemed to be working diligently and talking casually and cheerfully with other students at his table. As the class neared a close, I leaned in to check his progress and was shocked to see that he had very adeptly been adding many violent features to his drawing. For example, the feet were now bloody stumps with smoke rising from them; the hand was holding a cigarette; the model’s face now had bloody scars on it; and there were dead animals on the floor of his drawing, most of them decapitated or missing limbs.

“It was extremely disturbing to me, so I approached the boy by asking, ‘What happened here?’ He replied, ‘The guy killed all of these animals and wanted to burn them, but he accidentally burned off his foot when he was starting the fire.’ I told him that this was disturbing, and there was no way I could display it on the walls with the rest of the class. He didn’t care.

“I was saddened that he had taken such a fabulous drawing that I had made a point of praising, trying very consciously to build up his self-esteem, and had turned it into something that could never even be displayed in the school, nor could I hold it up again to show it off to the class. I brought the drawing to the principal after school, and we had a long discussion about him. This violence became a theme in all of his artwork. He moved again before the end of the year.”

Write down the answer to the following question: How can teachers create supportive emotional environments and help students gain insights into and manage their emotions?

Assignment 4: Write about and discuss the teaching or learning problem you wrote about during the preliminary exercises for this course in light of the major principles listed above.

Write down the answer to the following question: Might the learning difficulty presented in the problem have emotional components that suggest possible solutions or approaches to try?

Suggested readings between Unit 2 and Unit 3:

Possible review:

Immordino-Yang, M.H., and A. Damasio. "We Feel, Therefore We Learn: The Relevance of Affective and Social Neuroscience to Education." *Mind, Brain, and Education* Vol. 1, Issue 1 (March, 2007): 3–10.

Immordino-Yang, M.H., and F. Matthias. "Building Smart Students: A Neuroscience Perspective on the Role of Emotion and Skilled Intuition in Learning." In D. A. Sousa (Ed.), *The Future of Educational Neuroscience: Where We Are Now, and Where We're Going Next*. Bloomington: Solution Tree Press. 2010.

Possible preview:

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).