

Emotional Learning

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Educators must create emotional space in their learning settings, space that allows feelings to arise and be dealt with. We often clutter the learning experience with obstacles and distractions to evade emotions that education evokes. If educators leave those emotions unattended, it will not be possible to clear that space. Fear of feelings-and especially, the feeling of fear- are major barriers for creating the space that real education requires.

Space is often frightening. People are threatened by an open invitation to learn for themselves and to help each other learn; they would much rather have their education packaged and sold by the instructor or trainer. They are threatened by the mystery of what they do not know, by the thought of having to expose their ignorance, by having to raise to their peers in ways that would hardly occur to them outside the learning classroom, and by the possibility of a failure that will mark their self-esteem and their future. Learners come to a session with these fears close to the surface. If these feelings are not acknowledged and addressed, they will close down the space for learning.

However, educators, instructors and trainers come to the learning session with fears of their own. They are afraid of being inadequately prepared, of having their own ignorance expose, of meeting the glazed eyes and bored expressions of some of the people who should be learning. Behind the role and the expertise, educators wonder what students think of themselves. They may be afraid of the power the educator can exercise over them, the power of the grades and credentials; educators can be afraid of the negative and ambivalent feelings their power can create over the learners. The point is that educators need the affirmation of the learners as much as the learners need theirs. For a real learning experience to take place, it is necessary the presence of a sense of community among participants, and sometimes the traditional role of an instructor makes tenuous that to occur.

The traditional advice for educators is to never show the learners that you are afraid, or you will lose control! There may be a situation in which that is true, but this not a general case or a good decision rule. On the

contrary, a breakthrough learning experience often requires that we lose control so that truth, significance and profoundness can control us!

The empirical statement is that creating a learning space that is not closed down by fearful emotions requires an education that is not afraid of real feelings.

The educators have to make the first move (as well as the parents!) simply because he or she has the formal power to do so. In whatever seems natural and at ease, the educator needs to convey the message that their learning environment is a place where it is safe for your feelings to emerge. The statement goes on establishing that the educator has feelings too, and he or she will make him or her vulnerable by carefully sharing some of them.

Educating and learning are human enterprises, and it is necessary to use human emotions in the learning process rather than letting them use us! Educators have to take the lead in sharing constructively emotions so that learners feel encouraged to do the same.

Educators can respond to the feelings of the learners with the understanding that comes from truly knowing their own.

The suggestion is not to turn every learning experience into a therapy session, but that sensitivity to feelings is essential for learning (and management), not only because submerged feelings can undermine learning, but because feelings are part of the whole person.

Human beings can enter into the relationship called truth (knowledge grows by interaction) only in their wholeness, not with their minds alone. Sometimes feelings can be more vital to truth than the mind, since the mind strives to analyze and divide things while feelings reach for relatedness.

Paradoxically, even the feeling of fear that educators and learners bring to the learning setting is an obverse sign of their emotional need for community. The fears arise from the sense that community is not present or possible, that they are not related to each other in a way that allow them to be vulnerable to each other without being damaged. By dealing with those fears educators and learners begin to sense the mutual need for community that lies behind them, and sensing that need they become more able to open themselves to the community that is truth.

There are some quick recommendations for educators, instructors and trainers:

1. Begin with an extended self-introduction, asking learners to respond to queries about themselves that go beyond the surface statistics. Feelings will not be expressed and community will not form until people know each other and feel known in certain elemental ways. A learning space will always have to provide for the subjective experience of the learner to be taken into account!
2. Beware of the learner's feelings and respond softly to them. Questions should always be managed with gentleness and respect.
3. Take a few minutes at the end of each session to assess how the experience went.

In an emotionally safe learning environment, one created by the educator who does not fear feelings and who is wise in creating a comfortable relationship, the community of truth can flourish between participants in the adventure of knowing. The learning space should promote creativity, imagination and passion, as elements that mark the difference between a good learner and an extraordinary one.

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