

## Visiting Teaching Artists Model Strategies for Building Emotional Competency

**“The current tendency to reduce, divide and hierarchically rank the processes of thought that belong in their entirety to our species and to our biological make-up produces a subtraction of cultural resources and a consequent impoverishment of thought itself. Rationality without emotions and empathy and, equally, imagination without cognition and rationality, build a more limited, incomplete and impoverished knowledge.”** Veà Vecchi, “Innovations in early education: the international Reggio exchange” pg 9 Winter 2008

A teaching artist here in Los Angeles, and particularly a teaching visual artist, like myself, is very often contracted to teach art projects in a school for six or eight weeks to a number of different classes, varying in age and stage of development. A teaching visual artist brings an artist's studio into the classroom, and often shares the learning space of the classroom teacher as a guest. The teaching visual artist's curriculum quickly establishes a routine for the tools, media and clean-up in order for classroom teachers to feel more comfortable about how the classroom will be used. The visual arts curriculum also emphasizes academic integration and supports broad social-emotional perspectives which the classroom teacher can refer to and may not have the opportunity to promote single-handedly.

This paper then, will focus on the last element of a teaching artist's lesson, the social-emotional element, and specifically how modeling emotional intelligence and using strategies to support emotional competence, can transform the arts lesson. After all, the visual arts and aesthetics in general, form a body of knowledge that centers on mind training and concentrated pattern recognition. (“Adaptation” by W. Deresiewicz, pg.28, The Nation, June 8, 2009) Emotional competency is one aspect of mind training, and a growing body of physiological brain research supports cognitive psychologists in their focus on emotional stability as a requirement to the construction of knowledge. From many points of view, successful relationships (whether in the job market, schools or by connecting to abstract concepts) are determined by emotional competence rather than I.Q. Ethically, as educators and artists, our ultimate responsibility is for the whole person in every student. One way to do this is to understand emotional competence and where the emotions fit in the scheme of your brain's component parts, and then find the best practices to support that underlying competence.

The elements of emotional intelligence, i.e., emotional literacy (being able to read or identify emotions) and our ability to speak the language of basic social/emotional needs (for example, acceptance, affection, appreciation, autonomy, attention and connection) underlie emotional competence. If you operate with emotional competence, you feel you have a choice about how you express your feelings. You have self-control, you are trustworthy and conscientious. Furthermore, on the creative side, you are adaptable and have the courage to seek innovations. You feel you are guided by your core beliefs without being buffeted by impulses and upsets which have the potential to send you into negative and unhealthy spirals. As teaching artists, we want very much to ensure that our students have these core

competencies when they begin their skills-building in the arts or in general, for any creative endeavor in the classroom.

The primal skills of emotional competence involve handling impulses and dealing with upsets. Emotions are sensed physically by our bodies when we see, hear, touch, taste or otherwise perceive potential stresses or pleasures. They are called primal skills partly because they come from the oldest parts of our human brains, and partly because they are fundamental to our sense of choice in how we'll integrate the rational and the non-rational in our lives (as well as in the classroom). From an evolutionary perspective, our brains needed to help us respond to and survive in our environment with many bells, whistles, alarms and reflexes. All our emotions fall within the general categories of pain or pleasure, being derived from the brain's initial perceptual function of preventing pain (or death) and pushing pleasure (for the sake of procreation or sustenance).

The oldest part of the brain, the brain stem (with its miniature brain attachment, the cerebellum) is called the reptilian brain and was the first part of the human brain to develop. Wrapped around the reptilian brain is the limbic system, the mid brain or the emotional brain, where feelings reside. Wrapped around this mid brain is the cerebral cortex, or the upper brain; it's a gray, wiggly mass that you see so often in mad scientists' cartoon laboratories. In the front, behind your forehead, is the prefrontal cortex.

Brain research has recently discovered how the different parts of our brains interconnect. The upper brain and the prefrontal cortex work together to manage stress, upsets and impulses by locating drives (either pain or pleasure) and memory related to these sensory stimuli and accessing them for regulation. Hopefully, our brains will pass the stimuli through the synapses of the nerve cells back through the regulatory center and up to the upper brain where the processes of critical and creative thinking will reflect on the event. If our brains have been too stressed or alarmed, cortisol flooding causes our behavior to be stuck in the mid brain: impulsive, reactive and unregulated. If we can physically or mentally "motor out" of our stress and panic, it's possible for us to access the upper brain's rational thinking.

When everything is working smoothly, the stimuli are perceived by the brain and it is able to independently find appropriate coping mechanisms to "motor out" the feeling response to the stimulation. However, where challenges exist we need to think about and really pay attention to the behaviors, which are red flags communicating information about how a student might be regulating his/her emotions. It is a mistake to think there is much of a moral (right or wrong) implication in the choices our brains (read, "students") make. A student will respond in a variety of ways to stress or pleasure based on how flooded or not his/her brain is with chemicals (in general, stresses stimulate cortisol release in the bloodstream; pleasures stimulate adrenalin, among other hormones, in the bloodstream).

Constance Lillas has created a graphic representation of where our brains are working optimally. At the top of an arc of arousal, is the goal: alert processing. At the bottom of the arc is the sleeping state – also vital. When our brains are flooded with cortisol, in a fight-or-flight situation, a "frozen state" situation or even in a chronically recurring stressful situation where there appears to be "no exit", processing gets stuck on the arc halfway up and stays in the mid brain, the emotional center. It can't process information logically or rationally. Brains are "flooded" with cortisol and behaviors can be highly demanding, highly detached or highly compliant/ highly controlling. We have all experienced students that are "stuck" in this way;

emotional centering can really help establish a window of alert processing for students who seem overly dulled or hyper-anxious or hyper-attentive. In addition, when teachers pay attention to cultural roots and accept diverse communication mores, they can give students the sort of attuned listening that moves toward inclusion, then trust, then emotional safety.

Alert processing doesn't mean constant balance, it means you are able to find balance once a stressful, upsetting or exciting stimulus occurs. Alert processing connotes flexibility, resiliency and self-regulation. When feelings of anxiety, stress or fright have inhibited rational thought processes, any teacher will have a hard time helping children remember their lessons. Research also shows that this being stuck in the mid brain can initiate a pattern of responses that can eventually habituate thinking and prevent the brain from considering alternative responses in the future (it can't think about the box, let alone outside it). Since the brain is a use-dependent organ, how it is used most often becomes its default, and the alternative pathways are pruned away. Retraining and growing our brains is not only possible, it is possible at any stage of your life. In early childhood, brains prune themselves of extraneous synapses, which are not being used, to facilitate denser interconnection of synapses, which are being used; so too, in puberty, from ages 8-11 years, a child's brain will have another growth spurt. Thus, during these times, brains are exceptionally open to new experiences and relationships and synapses can grow exponentially. Nonetheless, the growth of the brain's neurons only diminishes when learning and challenges subside into endless routines and habits.

Learning best occurs in states of alertness, when emotions are positive or at the very least, neutral. To encourage young brains in school to develop states of alertness requires the language of emotions and needs, in either implied or explicit ways. Caring adults working with students know this language is a first step, so that feelings and needs begin to compliment the intellectual characteristics we already acknowledge in a person, and their personality becomes more distinct and memorable to us. An adult envisioning the long-term outcomes resulting from emotional competency understands it takes time and effort to achieve emotional literacy. It takes patience to learn how to identify and acknowledge (instead of stuff) feelings as they occur. Repressed feelings result in stress ("where is there a safe place for their appropriate outlet?" or "feelings are distasteful, and should be avoided") and fear ("what will happen when I tell someone how I really feel?"). As Joseph Chilton Pierce states, "Learning in a fear-based state imprints and reduces the ability to recall." (pg. 29 Compassionate Classrooms). The emotional centers of the brain are so powerful that negative emotions (hostility, fear, anger, anxiety) "downshift" the brain to survival mode and the prefrontal cortex areas of reasoning and self-regulation are shut down. (pg. 18, Compassionate Classroom) During these high-stress times, taking a moment to perform a sensory activity (deep breathing, stretching exercises, quiet music or even a drink of cold water) completes the sensory loop begun in the emotional midbrain and can really calm students and help them return to their higher order thinking skills.

Once classes are in session, a shorthand technique of assessing and addressing emotions will provide the students' underlying need for connection, and trust will flow from there. For example, "You have a big frown on your face. ' You wish you could choose which group you're in?" The adult makes an observation and guesses at what feeling/ unmet need the student is experiencing. If the student acknowledges this guess is correct, the teacher can proceed to engage with unconditional curiosity, openness, acceptance and love, the acronym "COAL" coined by Daniel Siegel (2007), and to empathize (by giving feed back, for instance, about

how it must feel to not have much autonomy). At this point, it's important to avoid 'fixing' the problem, commiserating, comparing how you or others are feeling. Empathy is a moment of reflection about what it feels like to be in another person's shoes, no matter what reservations you might have. Setting realistic limits, for instance, "Today it's too late, I will have to choose which group you work in." Developing solutions and following through with these strategies will finish the work that you start of finding agreement with your students: "Next week, do you want to choose which group you're in?" You have begun to establish a system of dialogue, of giving and receiving. This system demonstrates your values and your respect for others' feelings, and their need to express them.

What else is needed? Safe emotional states give the brain the most opportunity to choose how it will process critically, creatively or emotionally. How do we establish safe emotional states for our learning environments? We CAN model emotional safety when we build an atmosphere of trust in classrooms through our relationships with students. It must be noted that forms of punishment or coercion will seriously undermine this trust which we try to build, and we must try alternative methods of engaging; and precisely because these methods of engaging with students take more time to accomplish, we know they are building relationships with more intrinsic emotional connection. The focus on relationships is a product of brain research which shows that the most important childhood learning is skill-based (i.e., "how to investigate the world and interact with other people"), rather than fact-based (i.e., "the names of animals, different colors", the alphabet, etc.). School readiness research also supports relationship building because it provides children with the early experience of collaboration, which can be later built on with confidence because of this experience of nurturing, reliable carers. (pg. 231 Your Brain, The Missing Manual).

We have to keep in mind our goals are emotional competency, and in order to bring safety and trust to a classroom we will want to 1) focus on the needs of everyone in the classroom and 2) learn and practice the language of giving and receiving. This focus can help offset the preponderance of didactic, teacher-centered learning which we have been trained to accept.

To fulfill our dream of classrooms filled with young artists and successful learners, the following list of possible relationships would be vital to it (pg. 23, Compassionate Classroom):

**Teacher-Self:** a teaching artist can model self-regulation and will be able to better maintain an unbiased perspective. By first giving ourselves the same empathy one wants to give students and being able to recognize humor in situations can help teaching artists in the thick of it feel empowered. Reflective moments set aside to journal about lessons provides insight and direction that will prepare us well for understanding the underlying issues we observe but may not in the moment know exactly how to handle.

**Teacher-Student:** a teaching artist can envision various ways to connect with students in order to stay in the frame relational learning. Body language establishes connection by meeting students' eyes, smiling and using affirmative gestures. As teaching artists master the art of attuned listening, which hears almost without evaluation and judgment, the need to hear obedience, compliance or only the facts you just presented becomes less important than responding to a child's opinion, theory, questions or conclusions. Students can lead discussions and teaching artists can participate in them. Engaging respectfully with students about matters that interest them builds connections, and this endeavor goes beyond retrieval of facts. In this sense, teaching artists can shed the need to be "right" during discussions.

Teacher-Environment: a teaching artist will want to set up the classroom so there is as much success and as little failure as possible. Providing structures for “play” (time management, quiet spaces) can give students the inner peace they need in light of the many frustrations they feel; playing with materials and ideas gives children the ability to coordinate what they do know, representing what they know (as opposed to what someone else tells them they should know) which will build their self esteem. The way a teacher designs traffic flows, materials distribution and the time allotted to directed study vs. exploration will help students meet needs for collaboration, connection, autonomy and productivity.

Student-Student: this relationship is a powerful scaffold for learning. In small groups, independent expressions of ideas and creative solutions can be managed and then coordinated. Students’ relationships with each other are so vital that forums for safe (guided) exchange can be formally agreed on to provide a problem solving and follow-through “councils”.

Throughout these classroom relationships, students experience making choices, listening to others and taking in others’ perspectives. As a result, students feel there is a safety net. They are able to feel they can recover from failure and success, make mistakes and learn from them.

However, this dream may seem very distant to our day-to-day teaching experience. Like the following teaching artist’s testimony, many art teachers feel overwhelmed.

“I love being able to teach my passion, which is art. I do a lot of self-evaluation with my students. I don’t give out rewards. I give a lot of choices. Despite my efforts, I find myself pulled more and more into the domination system. I feel like I am out there on my own in this monstrous system. I see these kids who absolutely hate school. It’s an enormous battle. It’s wearing me down.” (pg. 10, The Compassionate Classroom)

While systemic issues can feel overwhelming, creating a classroom culture of emotional safety and competency can help the students on whom you have an immediate and direct effect. Over a period of 5 weeks in the spring of 2009, I observed master teaching artists who have formed relationships in public school classrooms. These student/teacher relationships were social constructions on which to scaffold their art forms. Each unique individual will have his/her own way of building emotional competency in classrooms.

The following are excerpts from my conversations with them.

“ In my visual arts classes:

- I establish guidelines about the amount of space we use together in the room.
- I use beginning and ending/ opening and closing rituals centered on breathing.
- The criteria I write on the board reflects how students will ‘make choices about...’
- I use elements of art as a way to reflect work concretely and build self-esteem.
- Feedback guidelines are important for giving thoughts. For instance, don’t make fun.
- I forecast the challenges in trying new stuff, giving them concrete feedback and letting students know we will concentrate on their work together until it’s finished. I’ll hold their work up in front of them to get a different view of it, and ask what else they think it needs.
- I constantly remind the students, “As artists, we...”

- I do what I say I am going to do, which makes me accountable and models that for kids.
- I accept a child's reservations as a starting point rather than glossing over them.
- If the students are very lively, they have just come in from recess, I spend time transitioning them into a visual arts "mind."
- I personalize the skills learning with stories I tell while I teach.
- I set up the materials and tools with a thought of the traffic flow; I watch their desks to see if the materials get piled too high and if so, I call 'Stop – spend a minute discarding what you don't need so you can keep a clear idea of the materials you have in front of you.'
- I don't offer materials on a first-come, first-serve basis. I stress there is an abundance of materials, as many as will be needed. They are offered in sequence with the lesson.

"In my dance classes:

- I use beginning and ending rituals, such as welcoming stretches and goodbye dances. Rituals set up parameters and safety. I make them sequentially easier to more difficult or new and different.
- I set up criteria to reflect both my and the students' accountability.
- I organize people in space: transitions are directed and move from simple one-step processes to complex three-step processes, based on skill levels and abilities.
- I give class members a variety of entry points in multiple intelligences ("what color will you be to skip across the floor?").
- I keep standards and expectations consistent and challenging; no child is excluded when they make an effort to achieve the standards I have set, and I notice efforts. I celebrate and support their adaptations of challenging tasks; some students find it a challenge to walk across the floor, so that is an effort I note and support, too.
- I try to keep a finger on the pulse of the cognitive, physical and social responses.
- When I ask a child to change his/her behavior and s/he does, I give them a subtle, often non-verbal encouragement.

"In my music classes,

- I involve student's analytic thinking as well as their creative thinking;
- I use a conversational tone when I give my directions; directions are concrete (in a sense-perceived language) and individualized, based on my observations of the students' actions;
- I make sure children have choices and they have the opportunity to make their own choices, within the framework of the skills-building;
- I add more and more elements (more instruments, more variety of beats) onto the foundational skill, once it is established;
- I vigilantly notice if children are in their bodies or not, and ask them to bring their eyes back to the classroom;
- I find ways to include multiple intelligences in skills-building: i.e., I ask what colors are the shapes they are making to the beat, etc."

These master teachers have been working in the school system for years, developing ways to encourage students and provide the emotional safety net, which the arts in all their expressive and creative powers can provide. Using the brain's most recently evolved social forms (language and consciousness) will empower young thinkers to acknowledge fears and yet enable them to take risks anyway. Students will use this skill to adapt to changes in the

environment, like the social demands of peers and the physical rigors of a compulsory education. They will be motivated to change perspectives and create innovative solutions. They will begin to communicate their questions and concerns; we will hear their voices.

“The brain works for the mind; the mind exists in our bodies and in relationship to our family and our community.” (Daniel Seigal, The Compassionate Classroom)

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