

## *An objective, reflective perspective on the subject of effective affective ☺*

by Dwayne Hodgson ([dwayne.hodgson@yahoo.ca](mailto:dwayne.hodgson@yahoo.ca) / [http://prezi.com/wm\\_oupbd7tr7/](http://prezi.com/wm_oupbd7tr7/))

I must admit that I was a bit surprised when Jeanette Romkema asked me to write a piece on learning and the "affective learning domain". After all, my WASPish upbringing and too many years of academic training have stressed the importance of being "objective", "dispassionate" and "rigorous". As a result, my Emotional Intelligence scores would hardly qualify me to join the EI equivalent of MENSA.

But hey, I'm working on it. And one gift that I've gained from my work with Dialogue Education™ is a growing awareness of how the affective learning domain frames and reinforces our learning. Here are a few reflections, suggestions and cautions based on what I've learned so far.

### **The Key to Real Learning**



Kurt Lewin is quoted as saying that no real learning takes place without the engagement of the affective learning domain (*my paraphrase*). I interpret this in two ways:

At the most basic level, if people don't feel emotionally safe to learn, they probably aren't going to engage in learning the new content and skills. Safety is paramount. You can design for this by creating a physical space that is inviting and safe in terms of the learners' culture. But also strive to create an environment that is non-judgmental, that encourages people to try things out, make mistakes

and learn from them rather than striving to be right immediately.

But it is also important to explicitly acknowledge the affective component of the topic they will learn. In my workshops on Results-Based Management (RMB), for example, I'm struck by how much emotion surrounds what might be seen as a dry, technical topic: the participants need to use RBM to receive funding, yet they often come in with prior experiences of this approach being counter-intuitive and frustrating. I've found that giving them a chance to name these feelings and validating their concerns helps to create a space where they at least become more comfortable and proficient with this approach, even while remaining critical of its limitations.

Another way that I understand Lewin's point is that emotions help us to select, process and file information. Given the barrage of information that we face all the time (especially in workshops!), our



**Revolutionize Your Learning! Transform Your World.**

Global Learning Partners, Inc. • 877-923-3393 • [www.globalearning.com](http://www.globalearning.com)

brain selects what to pay attention to and how to file that “data” using emotional tags. That which is significant to us on an affective level tends to stick (“*I like that! I can use that! That’s funny! That makes me angry!*”); but other information that doesn’t hit the emotional level gets sent to that little trashcan in the corner of your brain’s desktop.

For example, if you ask people to share a highlight from a sermon or speech they heard yesterday, I bet that 75% of them will be able to retell a story or joke that the presenter made, but most will not be able to provide more than a few snippets of the detailed facts or data. Perhaps this is because stories tend to invoke our emotions more than just raw facts and data. (Of course, the principles of Relevance and Learners as Subjects (Decision Makers) are also at work here).

## Creating Space for Emotion in Learning

Often I hear people talk about the passion of the teacher for the topic, and I agree that this is crucial: there’s nothing worse than an instructor who is clearly bored with the material. But ideally we also strive to ignite and fan the passion of the learners so that they can integrate the new knowledge/skills/attitudes into their life story.

This can be done by explicitly inviting learners to share their stories, and to reflect on the emotional significance of the learning content and experience for them – *How does this make you feel? What makes this important to you?* However, not everyone will be equally comfortable with this kind of question, so be sure to honour the different personalities in the room by giving space for people to reflect individually or in pairs first, rather than asking them to share their emotional responses in the large group right away.

Pay attention also to facilitating community-building amongst the learners during the learning process. Give enough time for introductions, group reflection, problem-solving together and celebrating their successes throughout the session.

Creating this space recognizes that contrary to how we were taught at university, we are more than just walking brains with a mail slot to deposit information into. And if change in the “affective learning domain” is a major goal of your learning event, consider naming some affective domain achievement-based objectives in your design so that you are clear to the learners about what you are looking to achieve together.

## Designing for the Affective Throughout the Learning Cycle

Here are a few suggestions on how you can incorporate the affective domain into different steps of the 4A Learning Cycle:

### Anchor:

Invite the participants to recount a story of their previous experience with the topic and to briefly reflect on the emotions they felt. For example,



In pairs, **tell** a story when you faced an economic problem? **Name** one word that describes how that felt. We’ll **hear** your one-word descriptions in the large group.

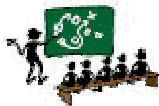


**Revolutionize Your Learning! Transform Your World.**

Global Learning Partners, Inc. • 877-923-3393 • [www.globalearning.com](http://www.globalearning.com)

**Add:**

Use a critical incident, case study or story to introduce the new content and debrief quickly by inviting people’s emotional reactions. For example,



**Listen** to this story of a person who experienced racial discrimination at work. How does that story make you feel? We’ll **hear** a sample of your response.

**Apply:**

Invite the participants to share their feedback from their group work using a story, a drama, a drawing, body sculpture or other media that will invoke an emotional response. For example,



In your small groups, **analyze** the situation that Joe found himself in and **act** out a short (2 minute) drama in which he constructively resolved the situation.

**Away:**

Invite the learners to name the emotional impact of the task for them personally. For example,



On your own, **name** how you might feel differently about this issue when you return to your work next week. **Write** yourself a short note in the space provided. You may want to review this later.

NB: I wouldn’t necessarily use the affective in all four steps of the same task! That would be way too touchy-feely for a tough guy like me.

**A Few Cautions**

Addressing the affective (the heart) doesn’t have to mean that we need to be fuzzy or non-rigorous in the content. While creating space for the affective learning domain is important, we need to ensure that we are also thorough in how we deal with the topic. We need our learners to engage with their heads *and* their hearts.

Second, a workshop is not necessarily the place for individuals to engage in therapy, especially without the prior consent of the other participants. While individual learners may need more time to process the emotional impact of their new learning, be careful about halting the program to deal with one person’s emotional reaction without checking in with the other participants. Better yet, affirm their reaction, create a process to help them deal with it later (i.e. at the break, in subsequent tasks and/or after the workshop), and resume the program.

Finally, like any principle or practice, we need to guard against reducing it to “technique” or “gimmicks”. If we engage the affective learning domain, it must not be merely as a way of making learning more “effective” but out of recognition of the singular importance of the learners and their integrated nature: mind, body and soul.

So, there are some initial reflections. I feel better; how about you?



**Revolutionize Your Learning! Transform Your World.**

Global Learning Partners, Inc. • 877-923-3393 • [www.globalearning.com](http://www.globalearning.com)