



AFFECTIVE EDUCATION

Or None at All

Teachers who practice affective education will help their students learn anything better, including the time-honored basics.

ARTHUR W. COMBS

Enormous misunderstandings, even hysteria, about "affective education" create major drawbacks to progress in our profession. People ask, "What do you want, education for intellect or adjustment?"—as though they must choose between smart psychotics or well-adjusted dumbbells. Such either-or thinking is not only inappropriate, it can be destructive.

Advocates of affective education maintain that concern for student attitudes, feelings, and emotions are important facets of the learning process and must be included in educational planning and practice. An educational system that ignores or rejects affective aspects of behavior runs the risk of making itself ineffective. Let us see why this is so by examining four major contributions of modern thought and research.

1. Our Meaning-Oriented Brains

Research tells us that our brains do not operate in simple stimulus-response terms, nor do they simply store "facts" for future reference. Instead, our brains are magnificent organs for the discovery and creation of meaning. Awake or asleep our brains constantly seek to make sense of inner and outer experience. We are seekers and creators of meaning and the meanings we create determine the ways we behave.

2. Learning is the Personal Discovery of Meaning

Learning always involves two things: exposure to new information or experience and the personal discovery of what it means. Any information will affect a person's behavior only in the degree to which he or she has discovered the personal meaning of that information. Historically, education has

been preoccupied with providing information. Even today, whenever we seek to improve the system we usually come up with the same solution: *more*—more science and languages in the early grades, drug education, democracy, physical education, more math, more instruction in reading, more driver education, and so on. How to help students explore and discover meaning is given far less attention.

We are obsessed with objectivity while the crucial aspects of learning lie in the subjective experience of the learner. To illustrate, let us imagine all information on a continuum from that which has nothing to do with self at one end to that which is deeply personal at the other. If I read in the paper that there were 15 cases of pulmonic stenosis in our local hospital last year and I do not know what pulmonic stenosis is, I see no relationship to myself and my behavior is not affected. Suppose a friend mentions pulmonic stenosis in the course of conversation. The matter now has more meaning to me and my behavior is affected more. I go to a medical dictionary and look it up. I find the term refers to a blockage of the pulmonary artery, and treatment for the condition usually involves a heart operation when a child reaches adolescence. Later, I receive a letter from the mother of a child in my class that tells me Alice has this condition and will undergo heart surgery next year. The mother asks that I make sure she does not overexert herself in class or on the playground. Now

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my understanding of pulmonic stenosis is much more personal and it affects my behavior much more. I talk about it with my colleagues. I keep an eye on Alice to protect her from overexertion, and I feel compassion for the child and her parents and concern for the operation looming on the horizon. Let's bring the matter much closer to self. Suppose I learn that my own little daughter has pulmonic stenosis. The more personal the meaning is, the more vigorous and extensive the resulting behavior.

3. Feeling and Emotion as Indicators of Meaning

Feelings or emotions are indicators of the degree to which something is personally relevant to the behavior. The closer an event is perceived to relate to the self, the greater is the affect experienced. News about rattlesnakes in Texas affects me hardly at all unless, of course, I am a Texan. Rattlesnakes reported in my neighborhood make me uneasy. The snake beside my foot fills me with terror. The same relationships hold for pleasant experiences.

There is some degree of affect in every experience or behavior, including learning. Emotion or affect provides a handy indicator of the personal relevance of whatever is being learned. Learning without affect is unlikely to influence behavior and an educational system that rules out feeling and emotion guarantees ineffectiveness.

The degree of emotion experienced is also an effective indicator of student involvement. This relationship can be neatly observed in group experiences. When a group of strangers first meet, they converse "at fingertip length," describing what they have seen or read or asking questions of others. As the group gets to know one another, per-

“learning is essentially a process of discovering personal meaning. . . .”

sonal references creep in (I wonder about; I doubt that). As the group warms up and begins to trust one another more, conversation begins to deal with personal problems. Feelings, attitudes, and beliefs are expressed, tentatively at first, and then stronger as time goes on. Finally, some therapeutic groups, where personal involvement is intense, may openly express the emotions of love, hate, anger, and fear.

4. Affective Factors in Learning

Four highly affective factors are known to influence the learning process critically. All four are matters of personal belief and feeling. They are self-concept, feelings of challenge or threat, values, and feelings of belonging or being cared for.

Self-Concept. What students believe about themselves vitally affects every aspect of their behavior and learning. Earlier we saw that learning is essentially a process of discovering personal meaning, the relationship of events to the self. The self, of course, means self-concept. Self-concepts are not mere self-descriptions; they always include affective aspects. Students may see themselves as able or unable, but such concepts are always accompanied by affective feelings of success or failure, acceptability or rejection, happiness or sadness, triumph or defeat. Students do not park their self-concepts at the door when they come to school. In classrooms, self-concepts determine the quality of the students' learning. The reverse is also true. Student experience in the classroom vitally affects the self-concepts formed about abilities to learn.

Self-concepts tend to corroborate themselves. Students who believe they can are more likely to try and thus are more likely to succeed. Their success and teacher feedback positively enhance students' self-concepts. Students who believe they cannot avoid the embarrassment and humiliation of involvement are likely to experience failure—which only proves what they already thought in the first place!

What we now know about self-concept and its effect on learning processes has been demonstrated beyond ques-



tion. Schools that ignore affective determiners of student behavior do so at the risk of diminishing their effectiveness.

Challenge or Threat. People feel challenged when confronted with problems that interest them and that they feel able to cope with successfully. People feel threatened when confronted with problems they don't feel able to handle. Feelings of challenge are conducive to learning. Feelings of threat are destructive. Learning occurs best when teachers are successful in creating atmospheres that are challenging without being threatening.

Whether students feel challenged or

threatened, however, is not a matter of how things seem to the teacher but how they seem to the student. Student feelings, attitudes, and beliefs are powerful sources of motivation and empathic teachers, sensitive to the feelings and beliefs of students, are far more likely to achieve productive learning situations than those who pay no attention to the affective aspects of learning.

Values. Values are generalized beliefs that serve as basic guidelines for selecting our goals and the behaviors we choose to reach them. They are also deeply personal and always charged with feelings or affect. Values are not

“feelings of belonging and being cared for vitally affect the learning process.”



restricted to religious, political, or moral questions. They play an important part in the dynamics of everything we do. Students who value reading, writing, arithmetic, problem solving, finding out about things, or getting along with people are far more likely to be effective learners of subject matter, interested students, and productive, cooperative members of the school community.

Critics of affective education protest the teaching of values in school. They believe that is the prerogative of the home and the church. The matter cannot be approached in such either-or fashion.

Some values are clearly the business of schooling, like valuing knowledge, skills, critical thinking, lifelong education, good citizenship; one would hope our youth hold these values in high esteem. Others, having to do with political, social, and moral issues, leave room for wide diversity of opinion and solutions. For these, the proper role of the school lies in the facilitation of exploration while respecting the student's own personal formulation of values or positions. Still others, like deeply-held religious, ethnic, or family values, even the most ardent advocates of affective education would probably agree, ought

not be required parts of the curriculum. Whether we like it or not, values are powerful determiners of human goals and behaviors. Schools that hope to contribute significantly to student growth and development cannot ignore the parts they play in the learning process.

Belonging and Being Cared for. Finally, we know that student feelings of belonging and being cared for vitally affect the learning processes. This has been amply documented by the research of David Aspy, Flora Roebuck, and their colleagues. One can easily grasp the significance of feelings, however, by examining one's personal experience. If I know I am cared for and belong, I feel excited, exhilarated; I want to get involved; I want to get with it; I enjoy the activity. If I feel uncared for or left out, I feel discouraged, disillusioned, apathetic; I want to escape, to avoid humiliation or embarrassment. It is apparent which set of consequences is most likely to lead to significant learning and growth.

Advocates of affective education are not harebrained zealots bent on destroying the traditional bases of American education. Neither are they well-meaning do-gooders seeking only to be nice to students. Instead, they seek to apply to the teaching process the best we know about the nature of students and the processes of learning. They want to employ principles, like those above, to professional thinking and practice. They know that when such factors are incorporated in planning students will learn *anything* better, including the time-honored basics.

Occasionally, it is true that well-meaning advocates become so preoccupied with student self-concepts, values, or feelings of belonging as to slight more traditional aspects of the curriculum. Such blind devotion is, of course, unfortunate and tends to give affective education a bad name. Such errors, however, are far less damaging than those committed by persons rejecting or unaware of the crucial nature and function of feelings and emotions currently held in modern research and theory. One cannot set aside established principles of learning because they are inconvenient. ■

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