

In the right mind: feeling ready for learning

How we are feeling has a big impact on how we respond to learning opportunities. The way schools shape the emotional element of the learning environment can be the difference between mass disaffection and deeper engagement with learning. Antidote's directors **Marilyn Tew** and **James Park** explore how schools can shape emotional environments that enable all students to experience 'flow' in their learning

The bell has gone for the end of break and Michelle's heart is thumping hard as she reels from the discovery that Chanice has 'stolen' her boyfriend Micky. Various thoughts crowd her mind. Furious with her two peers, she looks around for a way to release her feelings. Hitting somebody would feel good. So would tearing posters off the learning group wall or smashing a computer.

However, her teacher wants Michelle to sit down and focus on her learning. Irritation comes through in his voice as he asks her to put down her bag and take out her book. Her reply, in turn, is loud and somewhat aggressive. Now the whole group is on alert. Is there going to be an incident? Should they join in? Is there the slightest possibility of anybody learning anything today?

There are various ways in which things might unfold. The teacher might attempt to exert his authority in a way that further stokes Michelle's fury, intensifying her need to cause disruption, blocking any possibility of learning. However, he might realise the advisability of a more empathic approach, step back from his original stance and find a way of using the crisis as an opportunity to foster understanding, growth and a fuller engagement with learning.

Need for feelings

The daily life of schools is filled with emotionally intense moments. At times, individuals, groups, even the whole school will experience joy, anxiety, excitement, resentment or anticipation, whether in response to academic pressures, peer group interactions, family problems or external happenings.

The fact that this emotional turmoil may be

Characteristics of immersion in learning

- Complete involvement, focus and concentration
- A sense of being outside everyday reality
- Feeling clear about what needs to be done and how well it is going
- Feeling capable of accomplishing the task to a high level
- A sense of serenity that comes from feeling you have transcended your limits

The creation of a learning-friendly, emotionally supportive environment is not confined to classrooms

invisible to those who do not participate in it will not prevent it from working below the surface and distracting people from what they are supposed to be doing. The consequence can be a culture of criticism, cynicism and disaffection – in staff as well as in students – that steadily erodes the energy available for teaching and learning.

Some argue that such unsettling emotions should be allowed no space in school life. It is their view that students should be told to leave their emotional life at the classroom door, if not the school gate, and ensure that they can manage their emotions so that they are ready at all times to sit calmly at their desks in a state of readiness to learn. In this argument, teachers teach; it is not their job to manage the emotional environment of the learning space.

Even if such an approach were realistic, we could still ask whether such enforced emotional calm is really desirable. Asking students to block out their emotional experiences to focus on learning risks constricting their experience of learning.

Optimal learning

Research into the Effective Lifelong Learning Inventory (ELLI) at the university of Bristol (see: www.antidote.org.uk) set out to identify 'the qualities and dispositions that enable a learner to learn and go on learning throughout life' – called 'learning power'. The seven dimensions identified were all about our ability to use emotions to power our learning – see the box below.

Emotions direct our curiosity. Through our emotional life, we build a sense of ourselves as people who are capable of changing and learning and using our

ELLI dimensions

■ Changing and learning

Effective learners know that learning itself is learnable. They believe that, through effort, their minds can get bigger and stronger, and they have energy to learn.

■ Critical curiosity

Effective learners have energy and a desire to find things out. They like to get below the surface of things and try to find out what is going on.

■ Meaning making

Effective learners are on the lookout for links between what they are learning and what they already know. They like to learn about what matters to them.

■ Dependence and fragility

Dependent and fragile learners more easily go to pieces when they get stuck or make mistakes. They are risk averse. Their ability to persevere is less, and they are likely to seek and prefer less challenging situations.

■ Creativity

Effective learners are able to look at things in different ways and to imagine new possibilities. They are more receptive to hunches and inklings that bubble up into their minds, and make more use of imagination, visual imagery and pictures and diagrams in their learning.

■ Learning relationships

Effective learners are good at managing the balance between being sociable and being private in their learning. They are not completely independent, nor are they dependent; rather they work interdependently.

■ Strategic awareness

More effective learners know more about their own learning. They are interested in becoming more knowledgeable and more aware of themselves as learners. They like trying out different approaches to learning to see what happens. They are more reflective and better at self-evaluation.

Source: www.antidote.org.uk

If we are to learn well, we expose ourselves to the risk of experiencing sadness, anxiety, anger and disappointment

Creating the right emotional environment for learning will mean that students are more likely to risk, explore, make connections and enquire

Dimensions of an emotionally literate environment

Where students feel:

- capable – that other people were genuinely interested in enabling them to realise their potential
- listened to – that they are free to say what they think or feel and, in so doing, may bring about change
- accepted – that they are allowed to explore different ways of being themselves rather than being locked into a stereotype or a particular moment in their developmental journey
- safe – it is acknowledged that their emotions have an impact on what they think, say and do
- included – that they can find a distinctive role for themselves, which gives them a sense of having value.

strategic awareness. We need to be able to enter the different emotional states that enable us to make meaning out of the information we have received, and to use creativity in our exploration of ideas. Also, we become stronger as learners through our ability to be interdependent, interacting with others as well as working on our own.

The emotional side of learning means that, if we are to learn well, we expose ourselves to the risk of experiencing sadness, anxiety, anger and disappointment. This is the other side of the coin to the excitement, exhilaration and joy that is also opened up. You cannot have one without the other. It is our capacity to work through these types of emotional experiences that determines whether or not we become resilient in our learning, able to stick at challenges and find solutions to problems.

It should not surprise us that research by the Croatian-born academic and American professor Mihály Csíkszentmihályi (1997) suggests that the optimal state for learning is one of high emotional intensity, characterised as a state of 'flow' where the learner is fully immersed in whatever he or she is studying. The characteristics of this state are shown in the box at the top of page 23.

School leaders or curriculum managers cannot mandate such a state. It has nothing to do with lesson plans and target-setting. It can only emerge organically through careful management of the school's emotional environment – creating the conditions that enable staff and students to shape the type of relationships that make 'flow' possible.

Strategies for shaping better environments for learning

- Shift the focus from 'behaviour for learning' to 'relationships for learning' by changing the nature of the classroom conversations – talk about the attributes, skills and dispositions of learners and draw attention to the ways in which people can support one another in learning
- Change the learning conversation from behaviour-centred talk to learning-centred talk
- Create times when there is a relaxed atmosphere, so that adults and students can enjoy each other's company as they take part in a game or activity
- Promote the notion that people can be learning even when they are having fun together
- Encourage groupwork and opportunities for students to collaborate on projects
- Agree clear guidelines for working together so that everyone feels safe
- Use games, activities and challenges based on referencing systems other than written words – such as pictures, sound, music, mime, roleplay
- Encourage pupils to become active thinkers by offering challenges and creative-thinking activities
- Use every opportunity to make learning relevant and meaningful
- Reflect on the skills of learning, so that students can apply these skills across different contexts
- Encourage adults to be 'real' in their learning environments, presenting themselves as real people rather than just deliverers of knowledge, operating in a role

Creating the right emotional environment for learning will mean that students are more likely to risk, explore, make connections and enquire – all key aspects of successful learning.

Moving students on

Back to Michelle: while a traditionally minded teacher might argue that Michelle needs to be able to block out her emotional experience, an alternative view is that she needs access to an emotional environment that enables her to transform her turmoil into a state of calm.

The teacher who simply tells Michelle to sit down and get on with her work, threatening her with punishment if she does not comply, has no chance of getting through. It is likely that Michelle will not even hear him. But if he notices her distress, asks if she is OK or finds a way to make some personal connection, she is more likely to move to an emotional space where she can see things differently. It may be that she can put the issue to one side for the lesson and return to it later. It may be that she is able to acknowledge that, while the ex-boyfriend and Chanice might be rats, she still has her other friends and, with their support, can redirect some of the powerful emotions she is experiencing. Either way, she will be better able to turn her anger to calm, contain her anxiety and overcome her sense of isolation.

Such a shift does not require the teacher to spend time on Michelle's difficulties. What makes it possible is a sense of connection with other people – her peers as well as her teachers. They might not know what she is going through but, if they demonstrate an acceptance of her even when she is experiencing difficult emotions, they will enable her to become calm enough to understand a bit more about what is going on in her internal world. In turn, this creates the possibility of developing a more learning-friendly emotional state.

The teacher's capacity to do that has as much to do with the general emotional culture of the school as it does with his capacity for empathy and emotional connection. Is the culture one that acknowledges the importance of understanding what is going on emotionally so that it can be addressed? Is there an understanding that work to improve the quality of communication and relationships across the school community will lead to an enhanced experience of teaching and learning for everybody?

At Antidote, we carried out research into the factors

that make it possible for staff and students to have the types of conversations with each other that foster emotional understanding, enabling people to shift from learning-hostile moods to learning-friendly ones. We found that this was more likely if people exhibited the dimensions set out in the box top left on page 24. Using these dimensions, we then developed a tool that can help schools to build the right sort of emotional culture that enables emotional hurdles to be overcome through conversation, so that learning can thrive. We called it the School Emotional Environment for Learning Survey (SEELS).

We have also shown that there is a relationship between the dimensions measured by SEELS, where students feel capable, listened to, accepted, safe and included (CLASI) and the qualities of 'learning power' measured by ELLI. For example, one secondary school that chose to use both tools together found that students in KS3 were strong in their learning relationships but weak in creative thinking and their ability to link information together to make patterns of understanding (ELLI data). The students did not feel listened to in classrooms and did not find the communication of the classroom helped them to feel capable or competent (SEELS data). As a result, the school's teaching and learning team developed new approaches to learning across all subject areas. These focused on creative thinking, problem-solving and the links between information within and across subject areas. They also introduced teaching approaches that engaged pupils' prior knowledge and provided more space for them to have a say in what they learned and how they learned it. This led to a greater emphasis on paired and small groupwork and capitalised on the strength of learning relationships to help pupils feel they had a voice and were being listened to.

Making learning more likely

Schools need to know how to use this type of understanding if they are to shape learning environments as emotional spaces where even better learning can happen. Doing this involves paying attention to what is really going on, trying to find out

Things that may change emotional environment for staff

- Revising the induction programme for all staff
- Providing shadowing and mentoring schemes
- Making job descriptions for all staff transparent to their colleagues
- Ensuring that your whole-school appraisal systems work for everyone
- Setting up systems to ensure everyone knows what is happening with behaviour
- Setting up regular surveys of staff groups, leading to focus groups on particular issues
- Setting up regular meetings to discuss behaviour and staff-pupil relationships
- Providing training in assertiveness and restorative justice to support staff, alongside teaching staff
- Giving support staff time to be involved in planning with teachers
- Developing a staff-student forum to explore issues around teaching and learning
- Giving support staff new responsibilities for working alongside pupils
- Providing opportunities for different teams to share good practice
- Establishing clear structures for obtaining support in difficult situations within teams

from every member of the school community how they experience the different pressures they are under and how this affects the quality of their learning.

Our experience is that a school's teaching and non-teaching staff will be more motivated to engage with students and attend to their needs in an environment where they feel that:

- the school is a safe place for them
- there are organisational structures that provide support for them
- senior managers listen to them.

Pupils will feel safer, more connected and more ready to engage if the adults in the school are emotionally

It is likely that asking students to block out their emotional experiences to focus on learning results in a constriction in their experience of learning

Things that may change the emotional environment for students

- After-school activities involving work in groups to be owned by students
- New seating arrangements in class so that students get to know everybody
- More exciting student-led assemblies
- Form group discussions about life and school
- More activities in lunchtime, which are more effectively advertised
- Strategies for helping students to sort out each other's problems – for example, through peer counselling, a behaviour group and so on
- More structured opportunities for chilling
- Whole-school strategy for releasing stress experienced in lessons
- Involving students in researching ways to improve peer relationships
- Much more student involvement in the activities of the school council
- Projects to build understanding in students of how they learn well and sharing these with staff
- Asking pupils to develop their ideal curriculum
- Activities across year groups
- Team-building activities
- Using older students to help younger ones during lessons
- Using peer mentors to work with staff mentors
- Small group sessions to talk about issues
- Seminars on relationships and friendships
- Having one lesson a week to talk about learning and emotional issues
- Inter-year activities where all year groups mix
- Periodic workshops for groups of students to talk through their problems
- A lunchtime that is long enough to allow students and staff to relax and talk, to connect with one another or attend an organised group
- More games, contests and sporting activities
- A computer room set up and supervised by staff
- A quiet learning environment for students who want to find a friendly face or talk over problems
- Opportunities to run around, burn off energy and develop social skills

Lasting, sustainable and helpful change seems to come from exploring the issues from the perspective of different roles in the school community

centred, able to show sensitivity to their goals and desires and ready to empower them in their learning.

We regularly hear from students that:

- their individual behaviour patterns are highly dependent on the experience pupils have of their teachers
- knowing something 'real' about a teacher helps to build student-pupil relationships
- lessons that actively engage them are more likely to engage their desire to learn
- being trusted to work in small groups and take ownership of their learning experience is motivating.

If we think more widely about learning, it is clear that the creation of a learning-friendly, emotionally supportive environment is not confined to classrooms. The principles and strategies for achieving better emotional environments for learning that are given in the box at the bottom of page 24 apply in spaces beyond the classroom and in the extended day – in the library, learning hubs, learning centres, corridors, playgrounds, after-school clubs, the canteen, assemblies, and so on.

When a school engages with a serious desire to create emotional environments that support learning in its widest forms, there is a subsequent need to think about the roles, skills and knowledge of all the adults that work in the school, during or around the school day. Sometimes, we need to make an investment to ensure that the same ethos applies to every part of a young person's learning experience in both formal and informal settings. This could have implications for professional development and always involves a clear communication of the inherent vision and values.

Across school

Our two online surveys – the research-validated SEELS and a tailored survey aimed at digging deeper – are designed to help the process of finding out how members of the school community experience the emotional environment (for more information about the surveys and their cost, visit: www.antidote.org.uk). The online nature of these surveys makes it possible

for members of the school community to be completely open about what they experience. The aggregated information builds a picture of what is happening for staff and students, facilitating exploration of how things could become even better.

In one large and high-performing secondary school where we worked, staff and students reported many positives: students said they appreciated the work that adults did to help them to learn; staff said that they appreciated the opportunities provided for professional growth and development.

However, we also heard from students that they did not feel they were listened to by staff. This led them to conclude that staff were not interested in them as individuals. Comments to the effect that 'they only come here to get their pay packets at the end of the week' were common in the feedback we received. Students dealt with this sense of being undervalued and unimportant by behaving in challenging ways.

It was difficult for staff to respond effectively to students' calls for attention. They reported that the many new and exciting initiatives in which they were involved were putting them under strain. With many senior staff given the opportunity to champion a particular initiative in the school, they were under pressure to produce data, attend meetings, engage in discussions and so on. While the school was a professionally stimulating place in which to work, their inability to complete any task to their own satisfaction left a significant proportion of these senior staff feeling less than capable.

The fact that staff had not managed to find a solution to this problem was related to the lack of connection in relationships in the school. They were too busy to sit in the staffroom, and they had few opportunities to explore either personal or professional issues with colleagues. Meetings were packed with information, and the pace of change was so fast that staff always felt pressured as they had to move on to the next agenda item. The article on pages 40–43 shows what a positive impact the right staffroom space can have on fostering good professional development relationships.

Is there an understanding that work to improve the quality of communication and relationships across the school community will lead to an enhanced experience of teaching and learning for everybody?

Shifting emotional culture: one headteacher's views

- Acknowledge the role emotions play in shaping the processes and outcomes of teaching and learning – leading to the development of a strategic plan that fuses aims for teaching and learning with aims for emotional health and wellbeing
- Recognise that meaningful learning is a process involving emotion as well as intellect and ensure that the implications of this are reiterated in all communication with staff and students
- Empower teachers to take control of the teaching and learning processes in their learning environments by providing them with time to listen to, reflect on, and respond to the views of their colleagues
- Ensure that processes of change involve building respectful relationships, inclusive dialogue, and that they value pluralism and diversity by building relationships that respect everyone, through inclusive dialogue that acknowledges the diversity of the school community and allows for the different and often conflicting perspectives to be heard
- Incorporate the emotional dimensions of learning into the training and assessment of

teachers by making the exploration of emotional literacy and its links to learning an ongoing part of professional development

- Ensure that structures of schooling give teachers the time and opportunity to establish the emotional bonds and understanding of their students that are the foundations of effective learning – by recognising that student behaviour will only change when students feel that their teachers understand them as whole human beings
- Achieve a balance between challenge and security – stimulating teachers and students to realise their potential without risking damage to their confidence and pleasure in learning by respecting the fact that not everyone is ready for change at the same time and allowing opportunities for involvement to be decided individually
- Acknowledge that everyone – parents, non-parents, policy-makers, pupils and teachers – have a role to play in shaping an energetic and creative learning organisation by continuously looking for ways for people to articulate their experience, generate ideas and contribute

Students were in the same emotional boat. They felt that they were required to 'get on with the work' rather than be engaged and excited by what they were doing. Some 38% of the responses from students who we surveyed in this school using SEELS said that their experience of relationships did not boost their sense of being capable. There was a lot of tension between those students who tried to win adult attention through inappropriate behaviour and those who did the right thing. Collaborative activities, as a result, were difficult to achieve successfully.

Implementing strategies

When all the information from the two surveys is collated and distilled, a picture emerges of what is happening emotionally across a school. We capture the picture in the form of a flow diagram that shows the effect that one issue is having on the next or the way in which one part of the community is affecting another. The diagram below gives an example of this.

Once people see the picture of how the emotional environment impacts on the quality of learning, they can begin to talk with each other about how to make things better, exploring ways to shift their own patterns of behaviour, as well as bring about changes to organisational structures. In this particular school, two proposals suggested by the staff were to revisit and rationalise the meeting schedule, and to create a calendar of the year's deadlines for data collection. Both measures helped to address the levels of stress and so give staff more control over their workload.

An important aspect of our process is that we discourage people from rushing to solutions or trying to 'fix' any issues they have identified. It is possible that a simple solution may be found, but lasting, sustainable and helpful change seems to come from exploring the issues through the perspective of different roles in the school community. This can only come about when people adopt a stance that is curious and open minded,

While there is a lot that individuals and groups can do to shape pockets of emotional calm in a school, ultimately, significant improvement in the quality of a school's emotional environment involves highly strategic thinking

giving time for discussion and exploration.

We also suggest that the most powerful strategies will be those that come from inside the community, from its own understanding of what is happening and what resources are available to make things even better. Successful strategies can only really emerge from the people who know the school from the inside, especially when those strategies have enriched what others have done.

Possible ways to change the emotional environment for staff are given in the box top left on page 25, while strategies that might change things for students are given in the box at the bottom of page 25.

Leadership strategy

While there is a lot that individuals and groups can do to shape pockets of emotional calm in a school – where there is space to reflect and learn – ultimately, significant improvement in the quality of a school's emotional environment involves highly strategic thinking.

The box on page 26 gives the views of another headteacher, who we worked with for five years, on his learning from this approach to changing the emotional environment of the school.

The last word goes to another headteacher with whom we had worked for a year:

While it is a long process to shift culture away from results and standards, it is a very exciting thing to be doing.

Marilyn Tew, Development Director, and James Park, Director, Antidote

Antidote works with schools to help shape an emotional environment that enables everyone to learn and grow. Find out more at www.antidote.org.uk or contact the authors via email: emotional.literacy@antidote.org.uk or telephone: 020 72473355

Example of a flow diagram of a school's emotional health

