

In the Grips of Emotion

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The sign of intelligent people, is their ability to control emotions by the application of reason.

—Marya Marines, author, in *More in Anger*

In the dialogue Phaedrus, Plato describes the human condition as analogous to a chariot being pulled headlong through the sky by two horses, a dark horse and a light horse. The dark horse has a natural tendency to pull the chariot downwards toward the earth while, at the same time, the light horse has a natural tendency to ascend toward the heavens and free itself of the grips of earthly things. We, too, are constantly caught in that tension Plato suggests. Our bodies, through our emotions, pull us in one direction, while our minds, through our ability to think and reason, direct us to more lofty things: true knowledge, untainted by the fluid and murky tide of emotional energy, yet only really attainable when that light horse in us can break free of the pull of the dark horse and carry us to the world of pure thought where we can contemplate things as they are.

The idea that emotions and thought are two independent forces in our conscious lives that often are in conflict has persisted through the ages. Emotions such as anger, fear, and hatred often lead people to do things that they themselves think they shouldn't do. Yet they seem to lose control to these powerful forces that play themselves out in actions. If ever there was a recurring theme that displays the underpinnings of human history, this is it.

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BANISH OR CELEBRATE EMOTION?

Mr. Spock, the Vulcan who feels no emotions in the TV series *Star Trek*, or Data, the android in more recent versions of this series who wonders what it is like to feel things, are near-perfect thinking machines. Yet both are, in their own ways, appealing. Are they models that we should emulate? Should we suppress our emotions? Is that the way we can underscore the importance of thought in our lives? While some people try not to let their emotions surface, it is not easy. Emotions erupt in many ways, causing physical problems like ulcers or emotional outbursts like child or spouse abuse.

The extreme position that all emotions be banished is based on an over-exaggeration of the role of strong emotions that sometimes misguide us in our lives. Our lives are constantly charged not with extreme anger or rage or hatred, but with a myriad of likes, dislikes, satisfactions, and displeasures, that not only guide us successfully but also enrich the quality of our experiences. Even strong emotions like fear and panic have a clear function—self-protection.

Respect for emotions and the important role they play in our lives was not born with Charles Darwin, but certainly his work, *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* (1873), illustrates this point of view, as does *Emotional Intelligence* by Daniel Goleman (1995). We can now add to this list of those supporting and appreciative of the important role of emotions in our lives many brain researchers who have charted the development of and central role of the neural pathways that control our emotions.

New discoveries about the emotional side of our brains are being made every day based on sophisticated new technological advances that enable us to "see" inside our brains (Sylwester, 2000). (See also Chapter 30 in this book, by Ron Brandt.) One of the most distinguished brain researchers who has focused on the emotions is Joseph LeDoux, whose major work, *The Emotional Brain*, was published in 1996. This research points to a vast network of "emotionally charged" neu-

ral pathways in the brain that can manifest themselves in emotional states like strong fear and anger. When we realize the vast involvement of activity in these networks every day, we must appreciate the functional role of emotions in our lives.

The great medieval thinker Saint Thomas Aquinas embraced the idea that without these emotional charges, our thoughts alone would be incapable of moving us to action. It takes knowledge that radishes are bitter (thought) and dislike of bitter things (emotion) to cause us to avoid eating radishes. Thought without emotion is dormant; emotion without thought is blind. In fact, the debate over this issue is many centuries older, appearing in the works of Plato and Aristotle, who disagreed on this point.

However one might feel about the connection between thought and action, there are two fundamental tenets about our emotional life that most contemporary thinkers embrace. First, we have emotions, they have a function in our lives, and we should accept them. Second, we need thought to reflect about what we should do based on the emotions we feel. Most present educational interventions are based on these two views (Eliasetal., 1997).

TEACHING STUDENTS TO COPE WITH THEIR EMOTIONS

A lesson book for young children on thinking and the emotions presents various vignettes mirroring situations in which students often find themselves. Students are directed to think about what emotions the children in the vignettes are feeling and the best thing to do about each situation (Shure, 1996). For example, in one vignette, a child is playing with a ball. A second child takes the ball the first child is playing with and starts to play with it himself. The first child gets angry and starts punching the second child. A fight results and both children are hurt.

The teacher might ask, "What was the first child feeling when the ball was taken away by the second child?" "What does that feel like?" "Have you ever felt that way?" The purpose of these questions is to enhance the students' awareness of emotions and, by extension, help them become more aware of their own emotional lives.

The second set of questions, however, deals with the actions that follow emotions. Students are asked to identify what the first child did and then to think about what other options he had. They discuss and list these options. Then the teacher asks them to think about the consequences of these other options, whether the child should have acted differently, and why. This is a fairly standard decision-making strategy used to

—Figure 29.1— Skillful Decision Making

1. What makes a decision necessary?
2. What are my options?
3. What are the consequences of these options?
4. How important are these consequences?
5. What is the best thing to do in light of the consequences?

Source: From *Infusing the Teaching of Critical and Creative Thinking into Content Instruction: A Lesson Design Handbook for the Elementary Grades*, by R. Swartz and S. Parks, 1994, p. 39. Pacific Grove, CA: Critical Thinking Books and Software.

teach students to think more carefully about their decisions before they make them. Teachers of older children often do well to supplement what are often basic decision-making strategies with more sophisticated strategies like those presented in Figure 29.1. More sophisticated graphic organizers can also be used (Swartz & Parks, 1994).

This type of intervention has two important features that distinguish it from other more or less straightforward decision-making lessons. First, it is important that the situation be one in which strong emotions precede actions prompted by these emotions without (much) thought. Second, it is important that the students reflect on the situation after the actions. The first of these needs little comment. Let's think about the second.

Having students reflect about behavior after the fact is not uncommon in schools. Students who "get into trouble" are sometimes asked to think about what they did and what they could have done instead. The purpose of such questions is not just intellectual, it is to try to influence the students' future behavior if something similar happens again.

Attempting to get someone to think about what they are about to do—or even are in the midst of doing—while they are in the grips of emotion is like trying to reverse the flow of a river. When we do this we are trying to prompt the individual to exercise some internal constraint on powerful forces that come from within—the forces of strong emotion. But, while the flow is often against the direction thinking may take a person, sometimes we are successful in reversing the flow. So the effort is often worthwhile.

The intervention that I am describing is built on the idea that reflection about actions is more effective when the person who is reflecting is "cool" rather than in the grips of "hot" emotional forces. If we can

prompt cool reflection and build up a person's internal mental habit of reflecting before acting, then even when in the grips of emotion, we won't need to be there to prompt such reflection.

Of course, strong emotions are powerful forces and often make it very difficult to reflect, let alone follow the dictates of reason in hot situations. But this may be a matter of degree; maybe we should not hope for 100 percent success, but accept some success as success and strive for more.

Reflection after the fact is often easier because people usually "cool down" after an emotional outburst. Using simulations such as the one in the intervention described earlier, gives us a broad array of examples with which to help students practice, rather than waiting for emotional outbursts for after-the-fact reflection.

I recommend this approach to bringing thinking to bear on emotion-laden situations with the following provisos: that the decision-making strategy used as a basis for instruction be as sophisticated as the students can be challenged to use, and not just restricted to "what is in the book"; and that if your goal is to help students develop strong habits of reflective thought, students be given continued practice in this approach with curricular as well as noncurricular examples.

DEEPER CONNECTIONS BETWEEN THINKING AND THE EMOTIONS

In the second half of the 20th century, the "philosophy of mind" became a central focus of much investigation. This tendency occurred in part because of the growing evidence that seemed to contradict any kind of spiritualism in approaching the traditional mind-body problem, and in particular because investigations of brain physiology seemed to point in the direction of identifying mental processes with specific brain processes. While this debate still goes on, one interesting line of investigation focused on the emotions and their relation to thought (Kenny, 1963).

According to this line of investigation, the idea that emotion and thought are diametrical opposites is replaced by the idea that emotion and thought are intimately connected. In fact, emotional states are fundamentally cognitive states in which various attitudes are adopted toward specific states of affairs that are their cognitive "object," much as beliefs are cognitive states focused on a state of affairs or object.

From this viewpoint, any bodily states like increased heart beat, getting flushed, and muscle tension should not be identified with an emotional state. Rather, these are usually caused by and accompany such states. Sometimes, in fact, people

experience emotions without these bodily changes, for example, being happy that two friends are getting married.

Let us consider one of those extreme emotions that we seem most concerned about: anger. Suppose Ralph, a young student, is angry. At first blush, this seems simple: a condition, anger, has overcome Ralph, and he is in that condition, much like being overweight. It has happened and that's it. Of course there are various things that Ralph might do to get rid of the anger, just as he might do various things to overcome the condition of being overweight. In the one case a diet might help relieve Ralph's condition of being overweight; in the other case, some sort of aggressive behavior may relieve his anger.

However, the way we talk about anger often masks its true structure. Anger is often directed at someone or something specific. Ralph isn't angry at anyone who comes along. Rather, he is angry at Sally. So maybe Ralph's anger isn't really a condition like being overweight, but rather is relational in character, just as being Sally's brother is relational. In this instance, his anger includes another person, Sally, just as being the brother of Sally is a condition that includes Sally. This, indeed, helps us understand why Ralph pulls Sally's hair, not Jane's hair. Ralph is not angry at Jane.

According to the view of the emotions we are describing, this explanation is not enough. "Ralph is angry at Sally" also masks something, and that is what it is about Sally that Ralph is angry about. When Ralph is angry at Sally it is not every-thing about Sally that Ralph is angry about. For example, Sally's desk is right next to Ralph's. Ralph is not angry at that. In fact, he sort of likes it. Rather, Ralph is angry that Sally opened his desk and took his pencils, leaving him with nothing to write with. Ralph is angry that Sally took his pencils. It is this state of affairs that is the object of Ralph's anger. It is because Sally plays the role she does in this state of affairs that we say that Ralph is angry at Sally, but the true situation is that Ralph is angry that Sally took his pencils!

Of course, Ralph could have several different attitudes toward that state of affairs. Ralph could be happy that Sally took his pencils because he likes Sally and is glad she would want to use his pencils. Or he could be neither happy nor angry, but simply accept the fact that Sally took his pencils. However, in this case he is angry, and that means he has a certain attitude toward that state of affairs: he thinks that it is wrong and that something should be done about it. Without the thought in his mind that Sally took his pencils, he would not be angry at Sally and perhaps not think that anything she did was wrong and should be corrected.

How well does this view of emotions extend to other emotions like tear, hatred, and love? What about the obvious challenge that sometimes people are just angry, but not angry at anything in particular.⁷ For further discussion of these questions, I refer you to Thalberg (1966).

Of great interest about this view is that the viability—indeed the very existence of—the emotions in question seems to depend on our accepting the truth of the state of affairs that they are predicated on. We can have beliefs regardless of whether or not what we believe is true. While I may believe that it will rain tomorrow, we could be in store for a sunny day. At the same time, if I know that it will not rain tomorrow I shouldn't believe it will. We have an obvious and interesting consequence when we recognize this about emotions. Emotions are appropriate only if the states of affairs that are their objects are true. We say to children, for example, "Don't be afraid; there are no monsters in your closet." We tell a friend, "You shouldn't love her; she's just after your money."

Let's return to Ralph and Sally. Ralph is angry at Sally and pulls her hair because of his anger. According to this account of the emotions, Ralph's being angry at Sally amounts to Ralph being angry that Sally took his pencils. Ralph should, of course, think about what he should do next before he pulls Sally's hair. But he should also think about whether or not Sally really did take his pencils. Suppose Sally didn't take Ralph's pencils and you, their teacher, know it. Suppose you know, in fact, that Ralph's pencils are still in his desk, but hidden under some books, and that Ralph has not seen them there. You might well say to Ralph, "You shouldn't be angry at Sally. She didn't take your pencils." When Ralph finds this out, he will, in all likelihood, no longer be angry at Sally. He might even, we hope, apologize to Sally for making this mistake.

Now, of course, emotions are complex phenomena and there may be other things, not so obvious, that Ralph is angry about connected with Sally, and that may sustain his anger even if he finds out that she didn't take his pencils. (Or Sally may remind Ralph of someone he is angry at for some other reason, giving rise to a situation of misplaced anger.) So maybe we have to say that his anger would probably dissipate, "all other things being equal." But the connection I have sketched here between emotions and beliefs is an extremely important one despite this complexity. For while it is clear that we shouldn't expect anything like a guarantee that a person's emotions will follow his beliefs when they are subject to his careful critical scrutiny, there are

many cases in which they will, and in those in which they don't, the difference may just be a matter of degree. Recognizing this important connection

—Figure 29.2—

Thinking Skillfully About Emotions

1. What is the emotion that the person is experiencing? To what degree is the person experiencing this emotion?
2. What is the emotion about?
3. Is what the person thinks the emotion is about accurate?
 - a. What information is there for and against this belief?
 - b. What does this information show about the accuracy of the belief?
4. If accurate, does the belief justify the person's emotion?
5. What is the best thing for the person to do given that he or she is experiencing that emotion on that occasion?
 - a. What options are there?
 - b. What are the consequences of these options and which are pros and cons?
 - c. Which option is best in light of the consequences?

If the person is you, then the pronouns should be changed to the first person and the verbs changed accordingly.

may well give us a further direction to go in to get a person like Ralph to think more deeply about his emotions.

This is a clear example of where some thinking can have a dramatic impact on our emotions, not just on what we should do once we have these emotions, but on the emotions themselves. And the interesting thing about this is, philosophical investigations aside, that we all, in one way or another, seem to recognize this.

HELPING STUDENTS THINK ABOUT THEIR EMOTIONS

Here is what I like to call a "thinking strategy map" for our emotional lives that grows out of our discussion of our emotions so far (see Fig. 29.2).

Like other thinking strategy maps for other activities like comparing and contrasting or decision making, this can guide us through a series of thought-prompting questions that can make our approach to our emotions more intelligent. Notice how the "traditional" set of questions about what should be done when a person is in an emotional state (#5)

appears at the end of this list, preceded by the questions in (#1) and (#2) about what the emotion is that is being experienced and what the state of affairs is that is stimulating the emotion, and in (#3) and (#4) about whether the beliefs it is founded on are acceptable. These are all thought questions requiring various thinking abilities, both analytical and critical, to answer effectively. Imagine how thoughtful and intelligent our emotional lives would be if we were in the habit of thinking this way about our emotions as they arose. This thinking strategy map can give new and enriched meaning to the term "emotional intelligence."

We can, of course, get students thinking about these questions in relation to their own emotional lives. The paradigm of this kind of intervention described earlier can certainly be expanded to encompass not only violent emotions like anger, hatred, and fear, but also positive emotions like love, empathy, and happiness. Real case studies like that of Ralph and Sally can be used to expand and enrich such a program, and students can be asked to role-play Ralph guided by this thinking strategy map. Indeed, teachers might develop their own simulations of emotional situations like the situation of Ralph and Sally.

The way such interventions might work would be guided by the explicit use of the thinking-about-our-emotions thinking strategy map. Teachers could also use an array of other tools and techniques used in other thinking programs, such as collaborative learning groups, "think-pair-share" teams, graphic organizers, thinking logs, etc. And, of course, students could also be engaged in metacognitive activities around thinking about their emotions and those of others. Their new ways of thinking about their emotions can be reinforced through reflective repeated practice for transfer.

But what of the regular curriculum? Where, in the context of what we already teach, are there opportunities for the design of what I have called "infusion lessons" based on this thinking strategy map (Swartz & Parks, 1994)? (See also Chapter 50, by Robert J. Swartz and Stephen Fischer, in this book.)

I once worked with a high school teacher of English, a Shakespeare enthusiast, who decided to tackle the question of emotions using the traditional approach I described above. His method involved asking students to simulate one of the many highly emotional vignettes that one finds so well-portrayed in

Shakespeare and then to think about the best action for the person feeling those strong emotions to take. This teacher chose the play *Othello* as his vehicle, and put his students in the position of Othello, wildly jealous of Desdemona's alleged amorous adventures, now about to kill her, as he does in the play. The students were to stop, imagine that they had "cooled down," and think about what other actions might be better for Othello to take.

I watched as this teacher struggled to get his students into the spirit of this decision-making lesson. They just wouldn't go there. The reason they were having trouble with the task at hand was that they were preoccupied with another issue: what Othello could have done to verify the story that Desdemona had, indeed, been unfaithful to him. For it was the scheming Iago who deceived Othello into thinking that Desdemona had betrayed him, and the students in this classroom were all worked up about how "stupid" Othello was to believe Iago. They thought of many ways that Othello could have thought about what Iago was telling him and checked up on his story. And, of course, they knew that if Othello had found out that what Iago was telling him was not true his jealousy of Desdemona would have dissipated and he would never have been in the position of considering killing Desdemona in a jealous rage.

At the time, the teacher and I both thought the lesson planned had simply failed. What we didn't realize was that the students were 10 steps ahead because they were focusing on the real issue—the appropriateness of Othello's emotions of jealousy and what a little more careful thinking might have accomplished. Now that I think back on this incident I see how that was the right center of gravity for this lesson, not what we planned for the students. And it is the kinds of reflections I have shared in this chapter, and the thinking strategy map for thinking about emotions, that makes this ever so clear. In fact, what the students in this classroom were reacting to was what Shakespeare, in his deep poetic wisdom, wanted his readers to realize and react to. Shakespeare was not the first champion of bringing thinking to bear on our emotional lives, but he certainly was one of its most articulate spokespeople. It is as important, if not more important, to help students get in the habit of thinking about questions 2 and 3 on the thinking strategy map for the emotions as it is to think about question 4.

So what is the moral of this story? Well, think of the variety and range of emotions and emotional

circumstances portrayed in the literature students are exposed to as they move from the primary grades through high school. *Othello* is there waiting in grades 11 and 12, but before that there is *Franklin in the Dark* in the primary grades, along with *Jack and the Beanstalk*, and, as we move up through the elementary grades, books like *The Sign of the Beaver*, a study in prejudice and the hatred it spawns, and in middle school books like *My Brother Sam Is Dead*. You don't have to wait until *Othello* to start students thinking about emotions, and what better way to do that than through the characters in the literature that they read about and identify with.

Habits of mind can be developed early, but the harder habits of subjecting our emotions to the life of reason and thought cannot catch hold if we wait until *Othello*. And where else can students learn to develop these habits in a sustained way than in school? Our curriculum already contains opportunities to do this, and we should all take advantage of that.

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