

**OF DISPOSITIONS, ATTITUDES, AND HABITS:  
EXPLORING HOW EMOTIONS SHAPE OUR THINKING**

By Ron Ritchhart

Harvard Project Zero  
315 Longfellow Hall  
13 Appian Way  
Cambridge, MA 02138

phone: 617.277.7371  
fax: 617.232.2568

Word Count: 1543

*When the teacher fixes his attention exclusively on such matters as these [the acquisition of skills and knowledge], the process of forming underlying and permanent habits, attitudes, and interests are overlooked. Yet the formation of the latter is more important for the future (Dewey, 1933, p.58).*

Do you ever wonder why it is that your students aren't applying the critical and creative thinking skills you have taught them more consistently across a variety of content and settings? Does it ever seem to you that, despite your consistent expectations for higher-order thinking, students still need to be stopped from rushing headlong into shallow or narrow responses to situations? Part of the problem lies in the difficulty of fostering transfer across situations and the need to practice skills until they become more automatic patterns of action. But, there is another culprit at work in producing this shortfall of good thinking, and it is worthy of our examination as well. Emotions. If we are serious about promoting good thinking, we have to pay attention to the role of emotions.

### **How Do Emotions Shape Thinking?**

Just how do emotions shape, and sometimes inhibit, our thinking? Our emotions have projective power over our thoughts. They act as filters to form our desires, furnish our capacities, and to a large extent rule our immediate thoughts. As we encounter fresh situations, become faced with novel problems, or grapple with new ideas; our emotional response to each of these sets in motion the initial allocation of our mental resources. In essence, our first "read" of a new situation is always centered in our emotions, feelings, and attitudes (Goleman, 1995). As such, our emotions are laying the groundwork for the thinking that is to come.

This rule of “emotion before thought” is actually quite adaptive. It allows us to act on instinct and initial impressions when we are threatened or in danger. Our emotion provides us with an immediate reaction when there isn’t time to think. In addition, our emotions can direct our thoughts long-term. When we feel empathy for another’s plight, our emotion may help us to direct our energies to doing something about the situation. When we feel joy upon discovering a new idea, our emotion may motivate us to make our discovery accessible to others. Our emotions act as magnets to either pull us into action or channel our energies in a particular direction. Our emotions are also an important means by which we evaluate situations and make decisions about what is appropriate in given situation (Damasio, 1994).

The role emotions play in shaping thinking may account for a large part of why we see a failure of good thinking in our students. When our consistent expectations for higher-order thinking still don’t translate into our students consistently using the critical and creative-thinking skills we so conscientiously taught them, it may be because their initial emotional reactions are carrying the day. In reality, it is not enough to teach thinking skills, we must also pay attention to the affective side of cognition by stressing the development of thinking attitudes and dispositions—moving away from a “cold” and toward a “hot model” of cognition (Tishman, Perkins, & Jay, 1993). In doing so, we help our students to develop their intellectual character: the propensity to regularly engage in productive patterns of thinking (Ritchhart, 1997) (see Figure 1).

### **Harnessing the Power of Emotion**

How can we harness the power and influence of emotion to promote intellectual character? Here are four steps that you can use to help students (and yourself) avoid becoming cognitive slaves to your emotions:

1) *Recognize your immediate emotional response.* Our brain is hardwired to feed us an immediate emotional response. We need to be aware of that and to recognize this initial response for what it is: an emotion-based first impression. In essence, we need to be metacognitive. We have to be aware of the thoughts we are having *and* their origin.

With our students we need to bring out and honor this initial response without ratifying it. Ask your students to share, write, or in some way acknowledge their initial reactions or impulses regarding a new problem, situation, or task and then to explore the source of those reactions. Where did that reaction come from? How does it connect to your beliefs and perspective on the world? How is your perspective influencing how you view this situation? How is your reaction typical of how you have reacted on other similar situations? What are the feelings that are shaping your thoughts?

2) *Challenge your automatic emotional reaction.* It is one thing to have initial thoughts and reactions to a situation, it is quite another to act on them. Intellectual character involves emotional management, the ability to act in a way that will lead to the most productive thinking. This means putting the break on one's immediate reactions in order to consider alternatives. This of course does not mean that one's initial emotional response is always negative or even unproductive, only that it warrants review and consideration.

Upon recognizing the often emotional basis of our immediate reaction, we need to ask ourselves questions that challenge this reaction. How and why might others respond differently to

this? What is another perspective on this situation? How might I look at it differently? What alternative options can I generate? What are the likely outcomes of my following through on this initial reaction? What might the benefits be of responding in a different way? How am I projecting my feelings about this situation onto others? How is this situation unlike others I have encountered? How can I use my positive feelings most productively?

3) *Develop an awareness of opportunities for effective thinking.* A big part of developing the thinking dispositions associated with intellectual character entails developing a sensitivity to occasions to engage in certain types of thinking (Perkins, Jay, & Tishman, 1993). When we are sensitive to occasions for thinking, we see beyond the surface of the situation and our emotional reaction to it. Sensitivity involves being able to say to oneself, “Hey, this would be a great opportunity to \_\_\_\_\_?”

There are two basic components to sensitivity: a) an awareness of *when and where* the thinking (both our own and others) around a situation or issue is becoming sloppy or narrow and b) an identification of *what* type of thinking moves might be useful and more productive in that situation, e.g. generating options, considering other points of view, identifying pro and con reasons, etc. We can help our students develop sensitivity by periodically identifying, examining, and naming thinking shortfalls as they occur in our classrooms, in our own lives, in movies, and in the books we are reading as a class. Even thinking through a math problem, one can identify the common “traps” students fall into because of first impressions.

4) *Act your way into a new way of believing.* Given the power of emotions to shape thinking, it would seem that if we could just change our beliefs, values, and desires; then we could change our thinking. If we just desire to be openminded in our thinking, then our thinking

will become more openminded. Unfortunately things are not so easy. As Dewey (1922) points out, “habits must intervene between wish and execution” (p. 30). You know this yourself if you have ever tried to diet, quit smoking, or stick to an exercise regime.

Fortunately, there is a solution to this dilemma. Dewey talks about the importance of developing habits, or patterns of action that are self-reinforcing and serve to incline us toward certain behaviors in the future. The power of action to reshape and form beliefs is recognized by psychiatrist and cognitive therapist David Burns (1980). In his work with depressed individuals, Burns counsels that it is easier to act one’s way into a new way of believing than to believe one’s way into a new way of acting. This sentiment is also captured in the pop psychology of the Nike ads that tell us to “Just do it.”

### **Attention to Skills, Emotions, and Habits Are Needed**

It is by our habits that others judge our character and it is by our “habits of mind” that we reveal our intellectual character. In our classrooms, we need to provide students with meaningful opportunities to engage in the type of productive thinking we want to see and thus develop such habits. For these opportunities to be meaningful, they need to be well-integrated within the curriculum our students encounter. Encouraging divergent thinking by brainstorming ways to use a paper clip is less likely to yield the results we are after than is brainstorming ways to design an experiment to test a hypothesis or investigating different approaches to writing lead paragraphs for a fictional story. Through the repetition of such well-integrated and authentic opportunities, students can act their way into a new way of believing.

In conclusion, it is important for us as teachers to make sure our focus isn’t too narrowly set on the development of thinking skills alone. We must also pay attention to developing the

dispositions, attitudes, and habits that constitute the intellectual character of our students.

Emotions are a force to be reckoned with, and we ignore them at our peril.

### References

- Burns, D. D. (1980). *Feeling good: The new mood therapy*. New York: Signet.
- Damasio, A. R. (1994). *Descartes' error*. New York: Putnam.
- Dewey, J. (1922). *Human nature and conduct*. New York: The Modern Library.
- Dewey, J. (1933). *How we think: A restatement of the relation of reflective thinking to the educative process*. Boston: D. C. Heath and Company.
- Goleman, D. (1995). *Emotional intelligence*. New York: Bantam.
- Perkins, D. N., Jay, E., & Tishman, S. (1993). Beyond abilities: A dispositional theory of thinking. *Merrill-Palmer Quarterly*, 39(1), 1-21.
- Ritchhart, R. (1997). *Thinking dispositions: Toward clarifying a construct*. Unpublished Qualifying Paper, Harvard University Graduate School of Education, Cambridge.
- Tishman, S., Perkins, D. N., & Jay, E. (1993). Teaching thinking dispositions: From transmission to enculturation. *Theory into Practice*, 3, 147-153.



Figure 1: Revealing Our Intellectual Character.

---

Our intellectual character can be assessed by observing the dispositions, attitudes, and habits that characterize our thinking. Of course, these dispositions may be productive or unproductive, attitudes positive or negative, and habits good or bad. Below is a list of six broad dispositions—all of which serve to promote good thinking—that are worthy of our attention and efforts to foster them.

- The disposition to be curious
  - The disposition to be openminded
  - The disposition to be metacognitive
  - The disposition to be a truth seeker
  - The disposition to be skeptical
  - The disposition to be strategic
-