

Module 4 – The Affective Domain

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This chapter introduces the importance of our feelings to learning and ultimately to our life success.

Try this exercise to start. Sign your name on a piece of paper. Seriously - really do that! Pay attention to how you feel as you write. Reflect for a moment on this feeling sufficiently so that you can describe it before you read any farther.

Next, switch your pen or pencil to the opposite hand--the hand that you do not usually write with, and sign your name again. Reflect on the feelings that you have as you do this second signing. How did these two acts of physical movement in producing your signature seem to differ? Focus particularly on how the *feelings* that accompanied these two acts of producing signatures differed.

Note especially the sensations that you experienced when writing with the unpracticed hand. Likely, you *felt awkward* and *frustrated* from not being able to so *easily* write your own name. You soon might *want to quit* and switch back to your *favored* hand if you had to perform a much longer writing task. The preceding italicized words are all manifestations of the affective domain's involvement in just this simple task.

Writing your name with the hand less favored is an act in learning something new and unfamiliar. Such acts consume energy and nutrients, because we are connecting and stabilizing new neural networks in the brain. Conserving energy is a survival response, so we might feel initially resistant to expending such effort. Learning something new commonly feels difficult, and feelings at the start are not usually comfortable. Through sufficient repeated use, neural networks become myelinated. Thereafter, they consume so little energy that the task they perform feels effortless. At that point, we have usually forgotten how difficult and frustrating our initial learning experiences probably were.

The *affective domain* refers to the realm of the mind that produces feelings and emotions. Many of these complex feelings are so consistent that we have collective meanings for single terms such as "like" and "dislike." These terms can address feelings of great importance to learning.

*Learning without passion, spirit,
and emotion is not at all what
learning can or should be.*

We all notice how much easier it is to learn something that we like to learn as opposed to learning something in which we find no interest. The focused feeling that we sense as, "I'm interested." or "This is so cool to learn!" is important to recognize as meaningful. It occurs whenever the affective domain aligns in concert with the other realms of the brain to engage in learning. When we are interested, more of the brain engages the task of

learning than when we are not interested. Being confident in our ability to learn, being inspired to learn, and enjoying learning are actually important to mastery.

Over forty years ago, University of Chicago's Benjamin Bloom and his research team (1964) recognized the importance of feelings and emotions to learning. They deduced a *Taxonomy of the Affective Domain* (Figure 4-1) that show distinctive differences in how people employ their affective domains to acquire expertise. For nearly forty years after, many psychologists dismissed the importance of the affective domain to learning. College instructors often disparaged feelings as touchy-feely nonsense that got in the way of clear thinking and cognitive mastery. Today, we know that such disparagement came from assumptions, not from understanding. In reality, no intentional effort to learn occurs without accompanying affective qualities. Important qualities of thought dominated by affective qualities are many and include attitudes, preferences, self-awareness, biases, ethics, self-esteem, self-efficacy, enthusiasm, and emotional intelligence.

Look at the base of Figure 4-1. The minimum affective engagement required to learn a subject is willingness to pay attention. Any of us who play with young children realize their inability to focus on any single thing for more than minutes. Their brains are not yet developed to focus attention for the extended periods of time that adult learning in college requires.

As seen in the figure, the higher levels of affective performance in which we become committed, impassioned and see gained competencies in some learned area as important components of our lives do not happen quickly or without long effort. Reaching higher levels requires that we need to develop the ability to do so by deliberately building the required neural networks over several years. This period of development is similar to and parallels that needed to make measurable progress in higher-level thinking described in Module 12.

After becoming able to focus to pay attention, we can begin to enter into deeper conversations with others. After doing so, we can better perceive the value of the learning. Thereafter, this valuing motivates us to reorganize the information into our own ways of knowing. Eventually we may internalize such knowing to the point that we can call on it to solve a variety of life's difficult challenges (Figure 4-1).

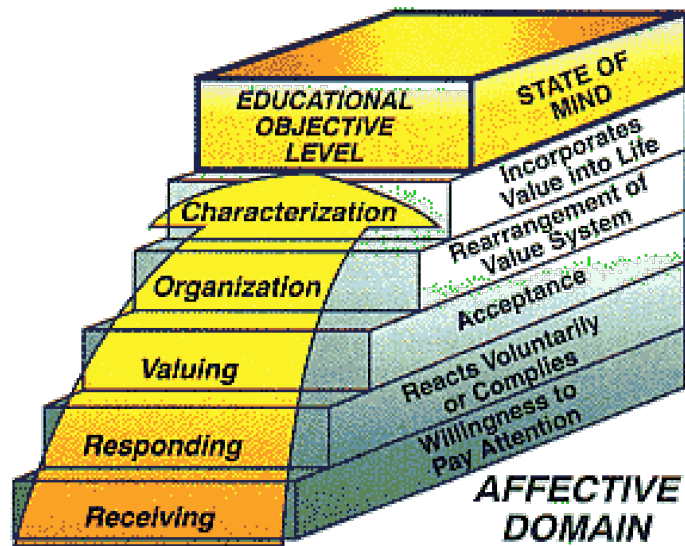


Figure 4-1. Taxonomy of the Affective Domain. The scheme reflects developed abilities to engage our affective domains in ways that are appropriate to a learning challenge. Those who can enlist their affective domains at will to engage challenges in purposeful and helpful ways have achieved *emotional intelligence*.

Surprise is an affective attribute, and it sometimes triggers a powerful involuntary learning reaction. During an experience like unexpectedly overturning a canoe, or even hearing emotionally laden news, the brain packs so many details into long-term memory at an accelerated rate that we think more time must have passed than actually occurred. You may remember details of where you were the exact moment when you learned of the 9/11 terrorist attack. Your parents and grandparents still remember exact details of the moment they learned of President John Kennedy’s assassination. The accelerated learning that accompanies surprise may be a survival mechanism to record the knowledge needed to deal with a future repeat traumatic encounter.

When we need to learn something, a reaction, “This is so boring!” is about our stage of affective development. It is not about the material. We are not children with biologically limited attention spans, and developing affect and interest is within our control. Every discipline in college makes available to us the knowledge produced by the impassioned commitments by thousands who came before us to learn and advance some special topic. *Something* about that subject was capable of inspiring lifelong passion and career commitments. Learning without passion, spirit, and emotion is not at all what learning can or should be. Acting to discover that *something* is acting to enrich our lives.

Finding some ways to make our learning more emotionally satisfying follow in the reflective exercises below.

Reflective Exercises

1. Try a variant of the two-handed name signing with your friends. This time sit in a group (four is ideal) and write your name with your less favored hand. Then pass the sheet to your left and the friend receiving the paper tries to copy your name in

- your writing style with her/his less favored hand. Repeat this process for several passes. Reflect on how your feelings differed by doing this in a group than when you did this alone.
2. Study your feelings of engagement by learning something that you initially feel as seeming difficult or intimidating by learning together with friends. Learning to contribute well to developing warmth and support with others may take some practice. Record changes you notice in your feelings about the subject as you learn with others support.
 3. Within the next day or two, notice when you are engaged with someone or something that interests you. Tune into your feeling and try to describe how that differs from being bored.
 4. Visit an instructor during her/his office hours and trying to learn what inspired her/him to devote their lives to specialized study. A sincere personal connection often engages affect when inanimate sources such as books and web sites are insufficient.
 5. In each class session, try to record something you learned that was surprising.
 6. When bored, try to take some action to allow affective engagement. Our life successes frequently depend on our ability to purposely engage at higher affective levels.
 7. Realize that we build and stabilize synaptic connections during learning. Consult Figure 4-1. How might frequently engaging in texting or side-conversations during class, skipping class, or repeatedly telling yourself "I am so bored" build affective neural networks that are detrimental to our own best interests?

Observations

1. Very likely you felt uncomfortable when you wrote with the less favored hand, but as you engaged in doing this with your neighbors some of you likely started giggling and laughing, and that change in affect likely displaced much of the tension and frustration that can be hard to displace when doing an exasperating task alone.
2. This relates to #1 above, but now we deal with real content rather than a demonstration exercise. If you are worried about learning or if the material is very difficult, seeking support of others by studying together regularly is one of the most effective tactics you can choose. Part of the reason is that the emotional support displaces fear and excessive worry, which are two affective feelings that are often toxic to learning. While a surprise accompanied by fear (like tipping a canoe or being in an auto crash) can be a powerful survival-learning mechanism, chronic fear is detrimental to learning.
3. We are aware when we are bored and interested but we rarely reflect upon either the essence of these feelings or how we can begin to shift from bored to interested by recognizing the feeling we need to reach as a destination.
4. What did you learn about your learning from visiting your instructor during an office hour? We hope that you learned something that helped you engage positively with the course by learning what fascinates the instructor. In the rare event that your encounter was unpleasant, such as one of you sensing that the other was not really interested in the other, the experience is immense in learning the power of the affective domain. We need emotional intelligence when we interact with one another. If the encounter

was good, write a sentence or two about what made it good. If the encounter was less than you hoped for, write a sentence or two describing a scenario of what ideally should have happened to make it a good encounter. Note any changes that might have been in your control and any that you could not control. In developing emotional intelligence, it is important to separate what we can control in ourselves from what others will have to learn to control. The learning we can control occurs only in our own brains.

5. Think back to your classes and note whether the act of recognizing a surprising bit of learning and recording it make it more memorable than other learning that went on in general during the classes.
6. Because the affective domain is a bit harder to perceive than the motor skills that improve through practice or the gaining of knowledge and intellectual skill, we often believe that how we feel is just how we feel and we cannot change that. However, the brain learns by growing neural networks that interconnect neurons with synapses. That means that learning occurs in the affective domain in the same biological way as in the other domains. The affective mind can learn, and we can gain increasing control over it through informed efforts to do so.
7. Because the affective mind can learn, feeding the growth of undesirable affective neural networks can establish habits that are hard to break, and could possibly ingrain personality traits that can be detrimental to our succeeding in high-stakes situations.

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