



THE BRAIN ACADEME'S

Teach to the Brain and the Heart Will Follow™

Personal & Professional Learning Series

A Presence of Safety - Volume 1, Issue 2 A Formula for Brain Responsive Environments

By Mary C. and Jon D. Appleget

A Presence of Safety and the Brain *Research and Approach*

On behalf of Applegets Unlimited Inc., we welcome you to the second issue of our Grey Matter's Newsletter. Thank you for your kindness, support and commitment to learning as we begin to build a global community dedicated to the brain and how it learns.

The human brain is essentially a control center that sends and receives information at extremely high speeds across the complex system of the body's neural net. A series of electrochemical responses to the wide variety of sensory input and thoughts are constantly shaping our perception of reality.

When we talk about establishing a *presence of safety* within the learning environment we are really talking about creating conditions which put the brain at ease and specifically *relieve* and *avoid* negative emotional states.

Perhaps you have heard the phrase 'lizard brain?' Lizard brain refers to a state in which the brain becomes highly focused on a perceived danger and may even cause a physical *jump* or *startled* reaction. These involuntary responses come from the limbic system's area located in the brain stem. A lizard or reptilian brain is limited in size and function and looks to be a brain stem only. This simply means that a lizard is constantly on the alert and constantly assessing whether the immediate environment is safe or not. If not, it must choose between fight and flight.

When a human experiences a sudden danger, like an oncoming car in traffic and they push their feet down on the passenger side floor board as if to apply brakes, we call that *lizard brain*. That reflex was evidence of your brain on alert, sensing danger and helping your body react.

Seth Godin, in his famous book *Linchpin* states "The lizard brain is not merely a concept. It's real, and it's living on the top of your spine, fighting for your survival. But of course, survival and success are not the same thing. The lizard brain is the reason you're afraid, the reason you don't do all the art you can, the reason you don't ship when you can. The lizard brain is the source of the resistance."

Obviously the human brain is more complex than that of a reptile, so it is not surprising that a human's perception of safety exists on multiple levels. When safety is brought into question the brain begins to prepare its systems for self-defense. It does so by releasing chemical neurotransmitters that simultaneously prepare the body for action and shut down unnecessary cognitive attention. The end results is that the brain functions best when it perceives the immediate environment and the emotional tone to be safe and comfortable.

It follows, that any learning environment intended to nurture growth and development would avoid and eliminate strategies and tactics that elicit fear, guilt, shame or doubt. When the brain is faced with *perceived* threat or fear it becomes very difficult for that individual to maintain the necessary focus and attention to process, remember and apply new information.

Safety, in the context of the learning human brain, goes well beyond the safety from physical harm. The mind has a set of psychological lines and boundaries that also have the power to kick the limbic system into gear and thwart the brain's attention and/or focus away from cognitive processes. When a foundation of safety and trust can be established, then the stairway to a vigorous and thriving learning process may be ascended without distraction or interruption.

Brain
Academe's

Vision

Teach to the
Brain and the
Heart Will
Follow™

Mission

By using the
power of the
worldwide
web, the
Brain
Academe will
reach the
hearts and
minds of
teachers and
coaches
interested in
strategies that
grow genius
brains.

Brain Responsive Strategy of the Week

How much influence does a teacher, parent, coach or leader have over a learner's sense of perceived safety? What steps can be taken to help create a learning milieu that promotes safety on a consistent basis?

One of the hidden secrets lies in the degree to which the teacher's beliefs and attitudes are in line with successful, self-directed outcomes. In other words, the teacher must first believe that the students are capable of being successful. This belief in and of itself can be felt and perceived by the learners. It is an intangible that becomes tangible through non-verbals; smiles, eye contact, listening and conversations. It's a caring, kind way with learners, a patience that recognizes differences and a genuine desire to help the learners achieve their own goals. A lack of true belief in the learners is just as influential. It translates as a rough, non-caring way, a lack of patience and a refusal to recognize different ways individuals learn.

When the brain and body experience any stimulus that is not perceived as safe, it will release chemicals intended to prepare for some form of self defense. The degree of danger may vary, but the brain's response, even to small degrees of danger or threat is enough to interrupt the kind of focus required to learn new concepts and information, as well as, the ability to interact and connect to the environment.

"Continuous effort - not strength or intelligence - is the key to unlocking our potential."- Winston Churchill

Brain Responsive Learning Guidelines

The Brain Academe offers a "Formula for Brain Responsive Environments" consisting of four cornerstone expectations that lay the foundation for a safe, respectful learning environment:

Lifelong Guidelines

- Personal Best
- Dignity and Respect
- Truthfulness
- Active Listening

In her book, *ITI: The Model, Integrated Thematic Instruction*, Susan Kovalik and Karen Olson emphasize the importance of behavioral guidelines for learning that are consistent with brain research, based upon respect for others and self. She reminds us that when these non-threatening, empowering guidelines are followed, students remain "upshifted" for learning. Keep in mind, as we address the four cornerstones, that the formula applies to the facilitator as much as it does the learners. To think that the teacher might expect these from their students and not from themselves is not reasonable.

When these cornerstones are role modeled consistently and expected from all participants, then the potential for achievement sky rockets.

I. Personal Best

The first cornerstone of brain responsive expectations is *personal best*. How does one influence the effort that learners will put out? The answer sounds simple, but the desired outcome relies on a complex weave of threads. Start by expecting it.

One powerful suggestion is to explain Kaizen to a group of learners. Kaizen is a Japanese term which describes the constant state of *increasing* improvement. Talk about 'Kaizen' as a reminder of the expectation that learners are giving their best effort, post the word everywhere, so that students see it often.

Remember that the goal is to create a *presence of safety*. How does expecting their personal best create a perception of safety? When the leader expresses confidence in the skills and abilities of team members, then the team member senses an 'expectation' that they will perform well.

When a teacher says "if you don't try harder, you'll never graduate!" These words may imply that the student should give more effort, but they have literally described the unwanted outcome; which stimulates the student to think about the unwanted outcome: which may result in fear or doubt, which causes a less than healthy release of hormones and chemicals that do not aid in learning. In fact, they impede learning. The teacher's choice of words, actions and consequences potentially sabotaged or grow the students' ability to perform their best.

The brain seeks patterns; sequences it can rely on to produce the proper outcomes. When the desired outcome is reached, the brain releases 'feel good' hormones such as serotonin and dopamine. The perceived success is rewarded by good feelings which build confidence and the desire to repeat the action.

When a group facilitator (1)describes the desired outcome, (2)clearly shows the way to achieve that outcome, and (3)expresses belief that the group can and will have success, chances for success will rise dramatically.

The safety that is enhanced by the expectation of *personal best* lies in the students' awareness of what is expected and the consistent nature of the expectation.

II. Dignity and Respect

The second cornerstone expectation is that of dignity and respect. These two words, dignity and respect, are the most powerful tools available to anyone doing any job or taking any class. With dignity and respect comes manners, kindness, and empathy; an ability to see things from the perspective of another.

As with *personal best*, *dignity and respect* starts with the leader and trickles down to the learners. Students deserve to be treated with the same basic respect that they are expected to show their teachers.

It is a reverberating effect which leads to safer, more friendly learning environments. It is much easier to

communicate clearly when both parties are showing genuine dignity and respect. The key word in the previous statement was 'genuine.' Most people at a very young age begin to recognize the difference between the people who dignify them and those who don't.

According to *The American Heritage Dictionary*, dignity is defined as: the quality of conditions of being esteemed or honored. When a learner feels dignified by the educator, new levels of trust can be reached. The kind of trust that allows a student to ask questions without fear, to approach a teacher one-on-one with a question or topic of discussion. A student who feels worthy and feels respected by a teacher experiences a natural increase in motivation to effectively learn that information.

"Honesty is the best policy."

Benjamin Franklin

III. Truthfulness

The third cornerstone expectation calls for *truthfulness*. Certainly there is plenty of philosophical exchange that can accompany such a broad and basic topic. In the context of a safe learning and nurturing environment; truthfulness provides the basis for the dignity and respect necessary for a learning scenario. It also reinforces that the leader plans to uphold their own responsibilities fairly and equally.

When the brain experiences genuineness and honesty it releases more of the 'feel good' hormones and increases the brain's ability to be comfortable with the individual who displayed genuineness or honesty.

When genuineness or honesty comes into question the brain experiences fear or doubt. As previously mentioned, fear and doubt can only serve to interfere and interrupt the learning process.

What's Your Management System? Rationale and Brain Connection

By Mary Appleget

As you plan your lessons and prepare for another week of instruction, remind all of your students of the management system that's in place. Keeping things organized and following the expected guidelines encourages growth and achievement. It puts brains into learning mode, increases curiosity and decreases apathy.

Management systems that include expectations and guidelines that meet both the primary and secondary needs of learners, such as assignment books, bathroom use, pencil and pen use, start time, appointments, lost and found, seating, clean up and dismissal etc...help the entire system run better. Learners who have an understanding of the expectations naturally think ahead and prepare better than those who don't. This critical area can be managed very effectively with well planned out organizational expectations as well as behavioral expectations.

Strategically plan different ways to remind them of the system that is in place. Make a special effort to create visuals that help remind them of what's expected. Keep a record of students who reach the expectations and make special effort to learn consistently and constantly. Record them in your gratitude journal. Pay attention to these simple choices and how they affect those in the environment. As you become aware, make them aware by honoring them! Give attention, time and energy to recognizing the strengths that are being demonstrated all around you and give effort to a recognition program. The brains will thrive and yours will come alive.

"I like to listen. I have learned a great deal from listening carefully. Most people never listen."

Ernest Hemingway

IV. Active Listening

The fourth and last cornerstone expectation is described as the catalyst for the other three. Active Listening allows learners and teachers to be sure about the exchange of pertinent information.

Active Listening is a skill that can be taught, role modeled and expected like any other skill. Leaders need many different ways to engage their audience. Strategies that aid in active listening, as opposed to those which discourage it, build skills that are self reliant and empowering.

No, the brain does not actively engage with an hour long lecture presented to people sitting in rows taking notes. Especially if the lecture and note-taking experience is repeated on a daily basis. It will certainly engage in enough listening to take notes, but lecturing and note taking is a 'one-way' street. The brain would prefer a little off-road freedom and an opportunity to be part of the process. Not to mention the opportunity for assessment and evaluation that is provided when students and teachers interact. It would seem that the teacher's brain will also grow and develop when engaged in active-listening and active teaching strategies.

Therefore, as you instruct, guide and teach content of any subject remember to expect and emphasize listening with your eyes, ears and heart. Remind the learners that listening with your eyes is 'looking at the speaker,' listening with your ears is 'comprehending what they say,' and listening with your heart is validating the dialogue by nodding your head and smiling, and maybe asking questions about what you heard.

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