

# PLASTICITY OF THE EMOTIONS AND THE HUMAN FACTOR

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Discovering the Book "Knowing your Emotions » by Dr. Brian Lynch, M.D. (Ed. Interest Books, Inc., Chicago, USA, 2010), has been, for me, a Pandora's Box opening. While understanding the emotional origin of our internal conflicts I was able look back at my work and my life events with a new perspective. This has allowed me to grasp the significance of the research results on the "emotional plasticity » leading me to understand the human cause of accidents, errors and non-intentional breaks due to the « human factor » and also our ability to fix them and draw understanding from our emotional clashes.

The present work developed from Dr Lynch's book represents a slow and progressive approach to define our emotions that may experience in various circumstances: a learning process, the choice of an occupation, or the choice of changing or quitting this occupation or training program. We will explain how all of us can envision, in a "non-intentional » way, future scenarios of disablement or conversely how we can use and optimize our emotional plasticity to overcome a negative scenario and alter our future. In this way, Marc William Debono's work on the plasticity of the mind brings an important contribution to this research on emotions.

## I) EMOTIONS COME FIRST

Our first step is learning that new idea: **“the idea that emotion comes first and then we think and do, or do and think.”**<sup>1</sup> When we think and do, when we plan our classes and everything goes well, people are interested, understand what we mean, are not confused or lost, they learn together, we are motivated to do our job, well there is no need for a paper. We are able to match mutual interest, “affective attunement”<sup>2</sup> and the transmission of knowledge. We have all experienced at least once this joyful and exciting situation of being enthusiastic of having learned something new!

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<sup>1</sup> LYNCH Brian, M.D *Knowing your emotions* from Brian Lynch, M.D. Ed. Interest Books, Inc., Chicago, USA, 2010, p.7

<sup>2</sup> NATHANSON Donald in *Shame and Pride, affect, sex and the birth of the self*, Norton, USA, 1992 p.112

But unfortunately that's not the every day life of the majority of the schools and Universities around the world. I would like to go one step further. Dealing with emotions in learning situation for both professor and student is very often difficult and frustrating. We feel, we evaluate, we do and then, often, too late, we think. Those spontaneous judgments, driven by emotion, are called by Paul Ricoeur<sup>3</sup> "*jugement prima facie*" and manifest what we desire or don't desire immediately. Those non-intentional judgments or intuitions are a connection between labels of good and bad, emotions of shame and pride, and actions, before we engage in reasoning.

Desire is not right or wrong. Desire is a form of interest that drives our attention to something. It is the right thing to do based on our memory. In this new moment the old memory might guide us into an error in judgment, such as I hate math or I am not able to learn math: I describe it by "**non-intentional attitudes**" during the learning process. Those non-intentional attitudes express an evaluation that interferes in the learning process and may block our interest, building a learning disability script, based on the affects of shame, guilt, dismissal and disgust. We get bored and then we quit.

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<sup>3</sup> RICOEUR Paul in *Soi-même comme un autre*, Le Seuil, Paris, 1993.

Following the works of Lacan and Freud, we can under evaluate or over evaluate the others, ourselves. Those non-intentional but conscious evaluations interfere and do damage to the learning process. They are based on our biography, on the complex memory- feelings that will constitute our learning script, on our affective history during the learning process.

According to Brian Lynch emotion is neither positive nor negative but neutral. But the evaluation one's make about his or her emotions, the label good or bad he associates to it, will increase the difficulties during the learning process. If we feel ashamed because we have done something wrong, the way we evaluate this shame, based on our past experiences will help us to proceed, or on the contrary will paralyze us.

Our evaluation in the classroom must follow the first sequence: we feel, we think, we judge and then we act (a stimulus, a feeling, an evaluation and then a response). We feel mutual interest, we analyze the facts, we think: are we able to solve the math problem, yes or no, why? And then we judge: I am using the wrong approach I have to reevaluate and change the method.

In fact if we look to emotions and the affects that drives those emotions such as shame and guilt that can block the learning process, we learn that they are intimately connected with non-intentional evaluations,

they can be the result of evaluations driven by fear and shame, and even the fear of feeling ashamed: “I will never succeed, my parents will be disappointed, the teacher is going to punish me, my mother said I was no good at school”, and we go on building our script.

In order to learn, you have to swim for instance, without knowing how to swim. You have “to do something, without knowing how to do something in order to learn how to do it”<sup>4</sup>. It’s risky, and very often we don’t succeed the first time, we need a lot of repetition to understand how things can work... So if we share mutual interest: affective attunement in the class, and have good explanations, maybe we can dive safely!

In fact, Lacan and Melanie Klein noticed a difference between cognitive interest and physical needs, we can’t reduce interest for Lacan to a physical need, because when we are interested in someone our imagination, our fantasy, plays an important part in the scenario. Why do we prefer the way a teacher explains a subject to us? Why are we more attracted to some-students more than others? Because they show interest in the class or because they remind us the student we once were? Why we don’t feel good with some teachers? Sometimes we have to go back to our very early childhood, and the way we were perhaps hurted while we expressed our inner affects in order to learn, how to stand, how to manipulate a spoon, how to speak... As describe Dr. Lynch: “ **Not that**

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<sup>4</sup> MEIRIEU, Philippe in Apprendre oui mais comment, ESF, Paris, 1991.

**babies cannot reason before talking, but observation shows us that they communicate first, much more through emotion.”<sup>5</sup>**

When I taught Melanie Klein to the students in Psychology of education, we were all very interested in following what she calls “pulsion épistémophilique”: the will of understanding, the will of meaning, a cognitive drive such as interest, babies do have, but they also need affective attunement, care, so that they can begin to learn, and develop this will of understanding in order to interact positively with the others safely: we do build together “scripts” of learning” or learning disability scripts.

In fact: **“A smile in Borneo is the same smile in the United states”<sup>6</sup>.** The enthusiasm of learning something new has a special taste, to stand up and walk, to hold on to a spoon, to be able to communicate through a language: this represents the ‘script’ of “pride”; the completion of interest-joy that will allow us later on to choose our own path, by ourselves, to experience freedom that comes with autonomy.

Speaking of freedom I refer to the human rights declaration: I do believe that we need freedom, brotherhood, and the same opportunity for development. I do believe we are born equal in dignity and rights.

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<sup>5</sup> LYNCH Brian, M.D *Knowing your emotions* from Brian Lynch, M.D. Ed. Interest Books, Inc., Chicago, USA, 2010, p.7

<sup>6</sup> LYNCH, *ibidem* p.8

Children love us spontaneously; they deserve to be loved in return during their learning process, they deserve scripts that increase joy and interest instead scripts that increase shame. For sure it will help them to stand up, hold on to a spoon or call your name, and later on sign their own names on a beautiful painting.

## II) UNDERSTANDING OUR EMOTIONS

According to Brian Lynch we can distinguish nine basic emotions:

“Interest

Joy

Surprise

Anger

Fear

Distress

Disgust

Dissmell

Shame”<sup>7</sup>

Those emotions are issued of our affect system: " *We must look far beyond the invisible drives in our search for the nature of emotion.*"<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> LYNCH ibidem, p.15

<sup>8</sup> Donald L. NATHANSON in *Shame and Pride, Affect, Sex and the Birth of the Self*, Ed. W.W. Norton & Company, New York. London, 1992. P.45

In fact: *“Affect makes us care about different things in different ways. The reason that emotion is so important to a thinking being is that affect controls our acts upon the way we use thought, just as it takes over or influences bodily actions at the sites specific for it. Whenever we are said to be motivated, it is because an affect has made us so, and we are motivated in the direction and form characteristic of that affect. Whatever is important to us is made so by affect. Affect is the engine that drive us.”*<sup>9</sup> That’ s why it is so important to pay attention to what drives us or on the contrary bored us, during the learning process.

#### A) INTEREST-EXCITEMENT

*“Anybody who writes, paints, composes, dances or invents will gladly tell you how life can be taken over by the excitement generated in the wake of such novel thoughts. So alien to one's normal life can be the excitement of creativity that the ancient Greeks believed new ideas and the emotionality associated with them were the gift of an external being called Muse. When we say that someone has been "struck by the muse" we mean to indicate that this person is "helplessly" excited by the new ideas constantly triggering the affect interest- excitement*<sup>10</sup>.

Why the students are interested and excited in the learning process? Usually is because the interest is mutual, is shared. The teacher, the instructor or the Professor involves them in the learning process. This

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<sup>9</sup> Ibidem 1 p.59

<sup>10</sup> Ibidem 1 p.75



involvement is very important. There are many ways to involve a student in the learning process: ask him to solve a problem with his colleagues instead of solving the problems for him and ask him to imitate us, show him his own abilities in solving problems, his personal talent, demonstrate trust, empathy, and help him to go on when he has difficulties. Offer him an actor learning script instead of a spectator one.

Even the way people look at each other can show empathy and mutual interest, can demonstrate to the students that teachers feel concerned about them, that they are happy to meet them:

## B) ENJOYMENT-JOY

*" Tomkins has commented that shared interocular contact-people merely gazing at each other- is the most intimate of human activities. How easy is this to understand when we recognize that the wonderful process of empathy depends entirely on the fact that each of us shares with the other this identical group of affect mechanism ".<sup>11</sup>*

Joy is contagious, when a teacher is motivated, is happy to do his job, is glad to share his knowledge, usually the enthusiasm becomes mutual, anyway it is easier to help the students to learn, even those who shows more difficulties in the learning process. On the contrary if the

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<sup>11</sup> Ibidem 1 p.79

teacher is depressed, angry, nervous, if he under evaluate the students, blaming them all the time, if he is the only actor on the stage, students have a chance to quickly get bored in that classroom.

### C) PRIDE

*"Throughout life, any experience in which personal efficacy is linked with a positive affect will produce healthy pride"<sup>12</sup>*

When students are actors, when they to solve problems by their own, they have a chance to be proud of their results. If they only repeat the lessons, they don't really create anything, they will only be proud of being obedient, but they will not learn to be the author of the script. In this way some teachers can manipulate pride: are the students going to be proud of pleasing the authority in the classroom even if they dislike what is going on in there? Or are they going to be proud of understanding how to solve a problem by themselves, proud of being free to do so, and to do it together?

What does means " personal efficacy" in the classroom, what is the script of the play? A competitive game full of shame and humiliation, or a cooperative game, where playing is a really pleasure, and where interest and joy are part of the script?

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<sup>12</sup> Ibidem 1 p. 84

To be proud:

*“This exultation involves the affect-enjoyment-joy and should properly be considered as one of the named emotions in which affect figures prominently. I define this feeling as one form of healthy pride- a normal emotion occurring in a rather specific situation, one that can be seen naturally and reproduced experimentally from earliest infancy throughout adult life. There are three conditions to one experience this sort of pride; (1) A purposeful, goal-directed, intentional activity is undertaken while under the influence of the affect interest-excitement; (2) This activity must be successful in achieving it's goal; following which (3) the achievement of the goal suddenly releases the individual from the preceding effort and the affect that accompanies and amplifies it, thus triggering enjoyment-joy. In short, healthy pride involves what Broucek (1979) calls competence pleasure when our competence has been tested in an atmosphere of excitement.”<sup>13</sup>*

When lives are ruled by shame in a competitive setting in the classroom, bullying is not far: *“Arrogance, haughtiness, disdain for the accomplishment of others, jealousy, envy and greed are only a few defensive attitudes and emotions that characterize those for whom self-awareness is more painful than pleasant. For those whose lives are ruled by shame, anything that can reduce the self esteem of others can assist them to feel better about themselves in relation to those others.”<sup>14</sup> P.87*

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<sup>13</sup> Ibidem 1 p.83

<sup>14</sup> Ibidem 1 p.87

## D) SURPRISE-STARTLE

*SURPRISE-STARTLE is the affect of instant readiness.*

*SURPRISE-STARTLE is the affect involved when we stop someone's world, when we create a situation that requires an immediate fresh start. It is all the forms of information that have "shock value" moments in which we are podded or precipitated into sudden awareness.<sup>15</sup> (...)*

*The real function of the innate affect surprise-startle is to clear the mental apparatus so that the organism can remove attention from whatever else might have occupying it and focus on whatever startled it.<sup>16</sup>*

The Vietnamese monk Thich Nhat Hanh, teaches us to be “ bell ringers”:  
“ *I'm going to tell you how to invite a bell to sound, with a small instrument like this, made of wood. The tranquility in us, the peace in us, we have to call them. There's tranquility and calmness and peace and joy in us, but we have to call them so that they can manifest themselves. (...).*”

When we invite the bell, it's one of the means to call the joy in us, the tranquility in us, so that we can awaken (...) If we do it correctly, peace will be there in our hearts, and we will immediately become calm water, and we will reflect reality as it is. If we are not calm, the image we reflect will be a distorted image, and when the image is distorted by our minds, the image is not the reality, and it causes lots of suffering. So we have to

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<sup>15</sup> Ibidem 1 p.89

<sup>16</sup> Ibidem 1 p.89

call tranquility, to invite it to manifest itself.

When I invite the bell to sound, it is because the bell is considered as a friend, someone who helps us to come back to ourselves, become calm. That is why, when I start inviting the bell to sound, I have to pay respect to the bell like this (Thay bows), exactly as we do to our friend. We pay our respect and love to our friend, so I pay respect to the bell: I join my palms, I make a lotus flower or a tulip, and I offer this flower to my bell, to my friend. Then I take my bell and put it on the palm of my hand, lift it to the level of my eyes, and look at it, and I breathe. We have to practice to do it.

When I hold the bell in my hand, like this, I start breathing in and breathing out. Breathing in, I calm myself, and breathing out I smile. My hand becomes a flower, like a lotus, and the bell becomes a diamond, a jewel in the heart of the lotus. Have you heard the mantra “[Om mani padme hum?](#)” It is in Sanskrit, and it means, “Oh, the jewel in the lotus flower!”

When you breathe like that, very deeply in mindfulness, with calmness, you become the lotus flower, because there is mindfulness in you that gleams like a jewel. It is a practice, it is not a prayer. Look at my hand, it looks like a lotus flower with five petals, and in its heart there is a jewel. I breathe in with that image, and then I become a lotus flower with

a jewel in me. There's a short poem that you should learn by heart, if you want to invite the bell to sound:

Body, speech and mind in perfect oneness, I send my heart along with the sound of this bell. May all the hearers awaken from forgetfulness, And transcend the path of anxiety and sorrow.”<sup>17</sup>

If we follow those beautiful teachings, start a new class, a conference, a cooperative dialogue is a way of “slowing down”, stopping all the others activities, and concentrating on the teachings, on the exchange. It is a way of focusing, of being fully present to what is going to happen during the learning process.

The problem is that very often the surprise startle at school reminds to us the bad news, of a surprise test, of a bad grade, an unpleasant remark, a frightening situation, where we were ashamed of having the wrong answer, or feeling bad for a good friend that failed in the test while we succeeded.

“*SURPRISE-STARTLE* does create a mood when we have experienced enough unpleasant surprises that our memory of them begins to trigger further unpleasant surprises beyond our capacity to reset or calm ourselves. Such I believe, is the case in the post-traumatic stress disorder

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<sup>17</sup> <http://mettarefuge.wordpress.com/2010/06/03/inviting-the-bell-to-sound-invitation-to-mindfulness/>

(years ago called shell shock) in which war veterans are incapacitated for years by their experience of battle.”<sup>18</sup>

## FEELING BAD IN THE CLASSROOM: THE NEGATIVE AFFECTS

*Our ability to govern and control our actions is influenced markedly by this fact of life. We seek out the pleasant and avoid the unpleasant. The innate affects of fear-terror, distress-anguish, and anger-rage are produced by yet another group of stimulus conditions. These three affects are alike in that they are responses to what we have earlier called “overmuch”. There are three types of overmuch, and three distinct affects triggered by these three distinct stimulus profiles<sup>19</sup>.*

Students and teachers have often to deal with overmuch in the classroom, disinterest, indiscipline, overwork, family problems, addiction, and all sort of bad scenes that induces a “learning disability script”: I am not able to teach to those students or I am not able to learn.

### E) FEAR- TERROR

*Where interest itself might trigger our memory of novelties past and enjoyment-joy reminds us of contentment past, fear brings reminiscences of frightening scenes, which cascade upon our consciousness at a rate guaranteed to produce increasing amounts of fear.*

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<sup>18</sup> Ibidem 1 p.90

<sup>19</sup> Ibidem 1. P.92

*Too many memories of too many dreadful situations may shift us from the discomfort of a scare to a direful mood, especially when some of these images represent unsolved problems from the past.*

At this point we can notice how unsolved problems at school in the past can contribute for a learning disability script, block our interest and not-intentionally be an obstacle for a new learning process. The bad memories come back from the unconsciousness and can paralyze us.

## THE UNCONSCIOUSNESS

*It seems that one of the basic characteristics of brain function is this activity of comparing current experiences to the stored representations of previous experience. Time and again in our study of human emotion, we run into this phenomenon. Everything that goes on, everything we do (or see, or remember, or in anyway experience) is compared to what has been amassed as a memory. Imagine how difficult would be our path through life were every situation always to be novel! The ability to compare immediate experience to past experience is the basis of all learning.*

*One of the great gifts brought by the psychoanalytic movement is the understanding that when people seem unable to learn from their experience one should consider the possibility that something has gone wrong with this mechanism of comparison. Empirically, it turns out that some life events*



*accumulate too much negative affect. When even the memory of such an event brings with it a surfeit of unpleasant emotion, the event can be forced out of awareness by a group of mental mechanism. By the time we reach adulthood we have accumulate enough such hidden uncomfortable memories and ideas that we give their warehouse a special name- “the unconsciousness”.*<sup>20</sup>

To overcome these situations we need to experience periods of calm during the learning process in order to transform the bad scenes into new ones: to change the script of the actor, to stop being the spectator of its disability, and being open to new possibilities, to an authentic learning script made of joy and mutual interest:

*“Surely there must be periods of constancy, occasions when everything just goes along at the same speed. As you might guess, there are certain levels of stimulus density to which the affect system does not respond, levels which are acceptable to the system. This corresponds to those comfortable adult experiences we call periods of calm, moments in which a fair amount may be happening but with no augmentation of the affect. So long sections of our day may be characterized by relatively constant levels of stimulus density accompanied by the phenomenon of no affect or very little affect. Not every moment is amplified by affect; not every moment is emotional.”*

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<sup>20</sup> Ibidem p. 96

Those periods of calm are very important to the learning process so everybody can concentrate in teaching and learning new knowledge. When we are calm people can learn to organize themselves and avoid overload.

#### F) DISTRESS :

*OVERLOAD: Evolution has “conferred” on us the ability to store retrieve memories with a facility impossible for prior life forms. With such structural potential comes the proclivity for avalanche. Only of the human can it be said that memory is capable of overloading our circuitry. The enormous amount of information made available to us by so many channels of data acquisition, as well as the huge and growing number of ways the activities, interests, and accomplishments of individual humans can be brought into public consciousness, all encourage the likelihood for overload. The tearful response to such overload may be very well a major affective experience for the humans of our future.<sup>21</sup>*

Overload is a major problem at school, that can lead to anger due to disability learning script.

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<sup>21</sup> Ibidem p.93

## G) ANGER

*Anger, in the language of the psychologist, is instrumental. It makes things happen. Anger, with its tremendous expenditure of energy, can be the instrument of change.*<sup>22</sup>

Due to overload, anger happens, the student quit the class, aggress the teacher, the bullying starts, the teachers explode etc.... Not intentionally everything goes wrong.

In those moments empathy can save the learning script, affective resonance can be very important in order to understand what is going on.

*“People who are in tune with each other live in a fellowship of feeling. “*

Meanwhile facing negative emotions most of the people build and empathic wall:

## THE EMPATHIC WALL

*Affect is damped, suppressed, blocked, by social convention. Our whole concept of what it means to be mature is based on the expectation that adults can “control themselves”. Control of affective expression reduces the amount of affect broadcast into the interpersonal environment. It makes life easier for those around us.*

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<sup>22</sup> ibidem 1 p. 104

*This contagious quality of affect is so powerful that the normal adult has built a shield for protection from the affective experience of the other person, a mechanism I call the empathic wall. It is a skill, a learned mechanism by which we can tune out affect display of others.*<sup>23</sup>

*It is the empathic wall that allows us to maintain our boundaries in the presence of other people when they are experiencing or displaying affect. The empathic wall helps preserve the unity of the self. Adults do not learn how to shield themselves from the emotional life of others suffer greatly because they fail to develop a secure identity, just as those who are overly “immune” to the affects of others suffers in the closet of emotional isolation. If the empathic wall is too rigid, we will be immune to feelings of others; if too flimsy, we will tend to be taken over by powerful feelings broadcast from outside ourselves.*<sup>24</sup>

## AFFECTIVE ATTUNEMENT

Affective attunement seems to be the way out emotional problems during the learning process:

*“Most likely mothers learn to adjust to affect display of their infants by giving up the empathic wall, by agreeing to allow themselves to be taken over. Doing this of course, they achieve a degree of connectedness with their babies that is a major part of the complex group we call love. Despite the importance to each of us of*

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<sup>23</sup> *ibidem* 1 p. 111

<sup>24</sup> *Ibidem* 1 p.112

*finding a relationship in which our worst feelings are tolerated and accepted, for the vast, overwhelming majority of humans the experience of love implies mutual permission to share the positive affects of excitement and joy. The absence of love is experienced as lonely for those who enjoy such communion. When we study that remarkable phenomenon called “good mothering”, we notice over and over again the caregiver’s ability to “tune in” on the affect display of her child. In recent years there has been much research on the transactions of “affective attunement”, and many scholars are now providing empirical evidence for the interactions mother and infant that Tomkins described in detail nearly 30 years ago.”<sup>25</sup>*

Teachers should be inspired by this caring process of “good mothering” and instead of building an empathic wall while facing emotional conflicts in the classroom, accept to dialogue with the ones who are crossing a difficult path, often due to bad scenes build in the past not intentionally and who are blocking their interest in the learning process.

Lets go back to the drive theory:

*“A drive, then, is a prewritten program that acts as an information source by creating a wish or a need. As Tomkins defines the drive system (1962, 31) the basic nature of this information is of time, of place and of response – where and when to do what- when the body does not know otherwise how to help itself”<sup>26</sup>*

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<sup>25</sup> Ibidem p.112

<sup>26</sup> ibidem 1. P118

Maybe due to past failure students are facing dissmell, disgust and shame. Their drive is a learning disability script:

#### H) DISSMELL

*“Thus dissmell operates to limit the hunger drive, odor can stimulate a protective mechanism that to limit the hunger drive; odor can stimulate a protective mechanism that creates in us an immediate requirement for distance from it source.*

*We can wrinkle our noses at people we dislike and move away from them; at worst we can call them “stinkers” and reject them totally. Somehow dissmell (which nevertheless continues to monitor food) turns into an affect as it enters our emotional life and especially as it begins to alter our interpersonal behavior. Tomkins calls this type of affect a drive auxiliary because it is a programmed mechanism originally operating to limit a drive. However the more importance a society places on interpersonal closeness, the more emphasis it will place on the odors we ourselves emit and on those we sense arising from intimate other.”<sup>27</sup>*

If dissmell is present in the learning process it will increase the chances of having problems during the learning process and having also a lot of disgust experience.

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<sup>27</sup> ibidem p.122

## I) DISGUST

*Sometimes what smells great taste simply awful. (...) P. 128 I suspect that all of us are forced to swallow many things we would like to reject. Apparently there is no limit to our socially constructed ability to disavow our hide our innate reaction of disgust.<sup>28</sup>*

At the very heart of those negative emotions that drives the disability learning script we find

## J) SHAME- HUMILIATION:

*” If distress is the affect of suffering, shame is the affect of indignity, of transgression and of alienation. Though terror speaks to life and death and distress makes of the word a vale of tears, yet shame strikes deepest into the heart of man. While terror and distress hurt, they are wounds inflicted from the outside, which penetrate the smooth surface of the ego; but shame is felt as an inner torment, a sickness of the soul. It does not matter whether the humiliated one has been shamed by derisive laughter or whether he mocks himself. In either event he feels himself naked, defeated, alienated, lacking dignity or worth.”*

*(Tomkins, 1963,118)<sup>29</sup>*

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<sup>28</sup> Ibidem 1 p. 125

<sup>29</sup> Ibidem 1 p. 146

Shame can really inhibit the learning script, encouraging repetition, imitation and slavery to authority, promoting passives attitudes in the classroom, and avoidance of the risk of being creative...

*“Humiliation is worse than physical pain”* (Sota in the Talmud) p.149<sup>30</sup>

### 3) NEUTRALITY AND THE PLASTICITY OF THE EMOTIONAL SCRIPT

According to Brian Lynch : *“The nine feelings are all neutral (...) they are not good or bad. They are all if you want really positive in that neutrality as they serve a purpose.”*<sup>31</sup>

Neutrality is a very interesting concept while we are studying our emotions and trying to understand them. Following some researches about neutrality, a neutral position in the classroom seems often the best one to deal with emotional and cognitive conflicts, it allows people to express different views and understand the internal logic of those point of views, and to be aware that they possess multi perspective understandings due to different types of evaluation. After that they are able to find with them an ethical solution to the problem they were engaged into. This step is the **intradisciplinary step**: it is how people deal from within with new concepts and ideas. How they allow themselves through their brain

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<sup>30</sup> ibidem p.149

<sup>31</sup> LYNCH ibidem p.24



neuroplasticity to deconstruct some disability-learned scripts and re-write new internal learning scripts: how an emotional script of shame can mute in a script of interest, joy and pride. The neutral position is a very interesting position to be reached because when someone learns to be neutral he is able to understand and internalize the logic or the emotional perspective of the other. However it is only possible to be neutral in a peaceful and safe context. The classroom should be considered as a peaceful and safe context where people is able to slow down and think deeply about the big life's questions about the meaning of life, for instance or how to solve a difficult math problem. After this "intradisciplinary step" it is possible to truly exchange in a cooperative way, in a transdisciplinary way with the others. However we will only be able to mute an emotional script of disability into a learning script made of interest and joy if we have affective attunement. So the "plasticity of our minds"<sup>32</sup> can allow us to learn the plasticity of our emotions: to not only sense and presence an emotion but also to transform it.

*"The fact is it is dangerous to dampen feeling too much. We need anger, fear, disgust, and all the rest so we might know what to do. We need, however to have control of these emotions."*<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> DEBONO Marc- Williams in La plasticité de l'esprit Etats des lieux de la plasticité, Part 1, <http://www.implications-philosophiques.org/implications-esthetiques/etat-des-lieux-de-la-plasticite/> and Revue Dogma (see Bibliography)

<sup>33</sup> LYNCH ibidem p. 25

A neutral and safe context can allow the expression of emotions and moreover to understand where they come from, from which past evaluation? Than through the memory of this evaluation we can have access to the complex memory feeling, the internal disability learning script, in the classroom. We are always talking about internal scripts in that case. Which complex memory feeling due to a negative, maybe a shaming evaluation is blocking the learning process, that involves the mutualization of interest?

In order to feel, and do something positive with my students about their pain that came from having negative evaluations, in the Master of psychopedagogy, I used the support of art: music, sculpture, painting, and even dancing. I did a lot of theater too. So that they could do something creative and transformative from they're pain of not being cherished and valued during the learning process.

The pride from my students came from having achieved something unique and great by their own. And those achievements allowed positive and healing emotions, like joy and the renewal of interest. In that case they had enough trust to risk the deconstruction of the old representations and reach new concepts, build new representations of the knowledge and of themselves, as persons capable of changing and learning.

So if we are able to have neutral places of expression, we can live the plasticity of new scenarios of the play in order to change the level of perception of an emotional or cognitive problem, and experience pride and joy, and then, finally change our memories inputs and write better scripts for our every day life.

#### 4) THE MEANING OF EMOTIONS

**“What is that we really, really want?”<sup>34</sup> Asks us Brian Lynch.**

That is a great philosophical problem; I have tried to show my students the value of human dignity, of not living only for ourselves but also for the others. I used the concept of responsibility and care from Lévinas, who describes the importance of the Ethics during the face to face between the weak and the strong, and how, while facing a defenseless and vulnerable face this face shows us the infinite value of humanity in her eyes, and calls us to responsibility. Ethics begins for Lévinas not in universal principles, but in a singular experience of the face to face between two human beings. It begins with an emotion, with an open heart. You shall not kill is a command for him that he can listen in the face of a defenseless person. It is a “salute”, a way of asking “how are you today”, of caring, of saying, please lady’s first... Maybe we could say Ethics begins with an interest in the other, without expecting a reward from that. Lévinas often repeats in his work that the reciprocity is not his problem.

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<sup>34</sup> Lynch *ibidem* p. 19

At first he feels responsible, he has this spontaneous statement, I shall do him no harm, than he thinks and do what he has to do: he cares about the other. He can see the dignity; he can see the infinite in the face of the defenseless other.

So when I taught Ethics to my students, I have tried to share an experience of the situation of taking care of someone, of a group with human problems, as poverty, illness, discrimination etc. We use to help poor people at the beginning of the year...when it was not possible; I worked with films, stories, songs, and photography, or even with their own life stories... Human values and mutual interest are not innate or strong such as self-interest for survival reasons. The response ability, and I quote Brian Lynch, is something you have to learn. Feel the vulnerability of the other, evaluate that you are responsible, and act figuring how you can help... To want common good, is something we all are always learning. Shared emotions of mutual interest can help us a lot in those Ethics teachings.

**“Where the feeling is coming from: it can be from outside or inside, past or present, memory or imagination”<sup>35</sup>**

In that way, we have to be specially careful with the evaluation problem: shame, disgust, dissmell or the expression of it, such as “I can’t

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<sup>35</sup> LYNCH, ibidem p.39.

learn this”, may be a belief based in imagination that is related to the “bad” label and connected with memories of bad scenes, such as hearing that “you are definitely not able to learn math’s”... Then, one’s end up having hard time with emotions, and under evaluating oneself at the classroom even before the exam occurs. The reasoning may be correct but the premises are false, like when one sees imaginary dangers on the classroom. (For sure I am going to fail etc.) So it is important to demonstrate to people suffering from shame, disgust, dissmell during the learning process, thanks to their brain neuroplasticity, that they are capable of solving problems through a self-evaluation that encourages them to solve the problem, by changing their own learning disability script.

**“Probably above all else, my goal is to help people on a road to not blaming themselves for acts and feelings they have no control over”<sup>36</sup>**

Following that quote we can notice that failing at school is also not intentional. Interest, curiosity, joy of discovery are spontaneous emotions of the infant, when someone gets hurt at school because he fails, while he is learning through trial and error, teachers should give him the opportunity to make another trial. The experience of being successful is very important in order to make the effort to change the disability learning script into a learning script.

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<sup>36</sup> LYNCH, ibidem, p.41

**“ I think we do not trust ourselves enough. We look too much for validation outside ourselves”.<sup>37</sup>**

Trust is with no doubt a major key in the learning process. In order to share mutual trust, we need time, and the experience of succeeding in solving problems together. Everybody needs patience in order to prove him or herself that they are capable of teaching and learning, and that the teacher is not going to let the students down if they fail. The levels of cognition are different, but mutual interest, that implies trust, must always be present to all the actors of the learning process...

**“I am talking about all of us. What we do (...) is only a proportional response to our hurts.”<sup>38</sup>***P.42 Knowing your emotions* from Brian Lynch, M.D. Ed. Interest Books, Inc., Chicago, USA, 2010

The plasticity of emotions are indeed a universal experience, to learn to recognize and understand the meaning of them, in order to encourage interest and joy during the learning process, through the experience of being successful, of being capable of learning and gaining autonomy is very important.

Sometimes it's impossible not to fall apart because our world is falling apart and it is a hard job to stay focus on our activities and keep our lives

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<sup>37</sup> Lynch, *ibidem* p.39

<sup>38</sup> LYNCH, *ibidem*, p.42

in control. I wrote philosophy books for children explaining to them the difference between public and private spaces.

Home is a quiet place, where everybody should walk unarmed, in theory a place of dialogue, trust and mutual interest... As the Amerindians beautifully said a place where everyone should have his “sacred space”, to be alone and happy with oneself. Home should be a place of joy, of self and mutual understanding, where one can do its favorites activities, rest, breath, relax find joy and care. Actually public spaces are very cold and competitive, it’s dangerous to show one’s own vulnerability, and one must be prepared somehow to the battlefield... Even when people stand for cooperation, human dignity and value, freedom, human rights, people have to fight against their own emotions for not go into fighting strategies, remain calm and face the dialogue with the opponents in an open and democratic space...

The public sphere is a difficult and paradoxical place. For some people good meanings sometimes can justify the worst ways. The public game as everybody knows it not always fair, and the script of the play must be very careful in order to achieve ethical purposes and earn a living:

“This very moment is the perfect teacher, and it’s always with us” is really a most profound instruction. Just seeing what’s going on- that’s the teaching right there. We can be with what’s happening and not dissociate.

Awakeness is found in our pleasure and our pain, our confusion and our wisdom, available in each moment of our weird, unfathomable, ordinary everyday lives.”<sup>39</sup>

## Part II THE PLASTICITY OF THE LEARNING SCRIPT

*“If one is interested in another, then one does not hurt the other.”*<sup>40</sup>

### 1) TRUTH AND HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

**“We will be interested in not hurting one another, therefore we will make clearer judgments about whether expressing emotion would do all persons involved more harm than good.”**<sup>41</sup> P.47

This is what it should happen in the learning process, especially when one’s express a learning disability script. When we give new information it is in order to help someone, this information is only useful if it doesn’t diminish him or her, if it allows him or her to solve a problem that he or she is failing to solve. If the truth helps the person to succeed during one’s learning process, then, we can say that this truth is deeply “true”. If the information is given with interest and affective attunement it will surely encourage the learning process. But when one intentionally

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<sup>39</sup> PEMA CHODRON in *WHEN THINGS FALL APART, Heart advice for difficult times* Ed. Shambhala, Boston, 2000

<sup>40</sup> LYNCH, *ibidem* 2 p.141

<sup>41</sup> LYNCH Brian, M.D *Knowing your emotions*, Ed. Interest Books, Inc., Chicago, USA, 2010 p, 47



scares or shames somebody in the name of his “pretending truth”, one is using the information and the power knowledge gave him - that is maybe wrong or partly wrong- in order to maintain a domination over him or her, and not to transfer a knowledge that could help the person to gain more freedom. The way the new information is given, during the learning process, can be a startle for interest and joy-excitement or on the contrary awake painful shame, dissmell and disgust and a self-punishment process. The connection between the plasticity of our emotions and the learning process is a crucial factor to encourage evolution in the situation of a learning disability script. In fact our emotions have to “mute” so that we are able to transform and overcome a learning disability script into a script that allow us to go on. We need to overcome shame, disgust and dissmell, the feeling of being somehow rejected through the label “bad” or “ wrong” thanks to the experience of mutual interest and affective attunement.

## **2) THE PRESENCE OF THE SOUL BODY**

**“Having people around you with whom you can begin to express emotion in more modulated and healthy ways will heal the brain.”<sup>42</sup>**

According to the transdisciplinary research, Art, Sciences and Philosophy are interconnected. There are indeed several paths to express and understand our emotions, the Art path, the Yoga path, the

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<sup>42</sup> Ibidem 1 p.47

philosophical or spiritual path, and the therapy path, the affect psychology path... Those paths are today closely interdependent; they refer to a “soul body” approach in which all those knowledge’s are nowadays more and more transdisciplinary connected. They all encourage an emotional plasticity, the ability to change the script: to let go the old, and to let come the new. Of course it is very difficult to change a learning disability script alone. The fact of experiencing success instead of failure in new learning situations, sometimes in a new context, with different persons, a context of mutual interest, shared joy and fully understanding, will be very important to evolution.

More and more schools are interested in applying methods issued from the Science of Education research field; where students are involved in the learning process, and considered as actors of the play and not reduced to repeat a script they don’t really understand and becomes boring, and affective attunement begins to be part of a new script in the scholar context.

However, periods of calm, the capacity of being alone and to develop an inner life in order to change the perceptions of oneself is also very important in the field of the plasticity of emotions. The meditation path can be very helpful to let go the label “bad”, and let come the label “learning”, to let go the shame belonging to our past memory feelings, and

let come the affective attunement that allows interest and joy to be again part of the script.

**“ (...) Everything, including ourselves, is eternally changing.”<sup>43</sup>**

Being fully present to our emotions, sense the shame, the fear, the guilt, the dissmell, the disgust, let them be present is important to be able to transform those emotions:

*“Our feelings play a very important part in directing all of our thoughts and actions. In us, there is a river of feelings, in which every drop of water is a different feeling, and each feeling relies on others for its existence. To observe it, we just sit on the bank of the river and identify each feeling as it surfaces, flows by, and disappears.*

*There are tree sorts of feelings- pleasant, unpleasant and neutral. When we have an unpleasant feeling, we may want to chase it away. But is more effective to return to our conscious breathing and just observe it, identifying it silently to ourselves: “Breathing in, I know there is an unpleasant feeling in me. Breathing out I know there is an unpleasant feeling in me. Calling by its name such as “anger”, “sorrow”, “joy” or “happiness”, helps us identify it clearly and recognize it more deeply.*

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<sup>43</sup> ibidem 1 p.49

*We can use our breathing to be in contact with our feelings and accept them. If our breathing is light and calm- a natural result of conscious breathing- our mind and body will slowly become light, calm and clear. Mindful observation is based on the principle of non-duality: our feeling is not separate from us or caused merely by something outside us, our feeling is us, and for the moment we are that feeling. We are neither drowned in nor terrorized by the feeling, nor do we reject it. Our attitude of not clinging to or rejecting our feelings is the attitude of letting go, an important part of meditation practice.*

*If we face our unpleasant feelings with care, affection, and nonviolence, we can transform them into the kind of energy that is healthy and has the capacity to nourish us. By the work of mindful observation, our unpleasant feelings can illuminate so much for us, offering us insight and understanding into society and ourselves.”<sup>44</sup>*

We can refer to “ **many levels of acceptance**”<sup>45</sup>, of openness, of generosity towards ourselves and the others. In fact there are many levels of acceptance because there are many levels of perception, when one reaches the level of understanding, one’s opens his heart and his mind, and it is not simply in a cognitive level or in an emotional level, one’s matches both... Most often **“We and our minds and bodies did the best**

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<sup>44</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh in *Peace is every step, the path of mindfulness in Everyday life*, Ed. Batam Books USA 1991 p.51,52

<sup>45</sup> *Ibidem* 1 p.51

they could under the circumstances”<sup>46</sup> There is not a parent, not a teacher, nor a student who don't attempt their best in a learning process. But sometimes, not intentionally, their best is consider as the worst...So we have to work out with the meaning of the script that guides the whole learning process, thanks to our emotional plasticity in order to figure how to change a learning disability script into a script of learning together, of sharing again joy and mutual interest.

According to Dr. Lynch: **“The two major emotions are interest and shame<sup>47</sup>: “I think we tend to avoid pain of emotional hurt at all costs. When people feel hurt they have four basic ways of avoiding and denying emotional hurt, no matter how small or how large. These four ways are 1) to go away; 2) to attack ourselves: blame ourselves. 3. To attack others; To avoid, by medicating ourselves with drugs or alcohol, or sleeping, or working to hard, or by the thousands of other distraction we invent.” Even “Fighting is a distraction”.**

The other issue is changing the script through our emotional plasticity, establishing a soul and body connection, thanks to activities such as meditation or also the Art path. Giving the person the opportunity to decelerate, re-think and transform his perceptions of the others, or of themselves. Thanks to this openness dialogue may externally happens.

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<sup>46</sup> Ibidem 1 p.51

<sup>47</sup> ibidem 1 p.53

Wisdom is not simply being ready to accept new information: we need to open our heart for the one we are giving the new information, we need mutual trust, we need “ affective attunement”, emotional and cognitive skills so that the new information can really brings evolution and joy.

## **2) A STIMULUS, A FEELING, A NEW EVALUATION, A DIFFERENT RESPONSE: THE ART BODY**

*“Reason does what emotion asks”<sup>48</sup>.*

**We should start to employ the key emotion of interest to help us know those and ourselves dearest to us.”<sup>49</sup>**

Following my researches about the non intention self evaluations, the process of under evaluating (I am bad) or over evaluating (I am the best), through diminishing or idealizing oneself, is part of the learning disability script. For instance, while facing a failure (the stimulus) we feel disgust and shame (the emotion), we evaluate that we are bad (non intentional evaluation based on our biographical complex memory-feelings). However while facing failure we can learn with the help of others and a meditation process to change our emotions, our evaluation, and our response, thanks to our mind plasticity. We can while facing a

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<sup>48</sup> LYNCH, *ibidem*, p.194

<sup>49</sup> LYNCH *ibidem* p.70

failure, remain neutral and calm, evaluate: I am in a learning process and change the response: what can I do in order to understand my mistake and how can I change the script in order to succeed?

In fact **“When we are both calm we will come to be able to create new habits based on mutual interest that will lead to more and more times when will be able to help each other turn bad scenes into good ones we so dearly wants.”**<sup>50</sup>

Again calm is a very important condition in order to improve the plasticity of emotions in the process of changing the script of the play.

**“The little things are symbols for the bigger things”**<sup>51</sup>

According to my research the not intentional attitudes, driven by emotions and that might hurt oneself or the other and leads to attack, self attack, avoidance or withdraw, have dreadful consequences through negative evaluations, we under evaluate ourselves, and we interrupt the learning or the teaching process. So we must be very careful before we criticize someone during a learning process, and we must be very careful also with our self-punishing affects of shame and guilt while we fail. Personally in my classes I chose to show to the students how they could succeed focusing on their achievements or their inner abilities instead of pointing out mistakes. I use to work with “ success indicators” in order to help them to achieve their goal. My evaluation process was also very

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<sup>50</sup> LYNCH, *ibidem*, p.95

<sup>51</sup> LYNCH *ibidem* p.73

careful: we used to evaluate three times the same exam, until they succeeded, because learning involves a lot of repetition, and demand second chances.

**“The little things and the big things are nevertheless very connected”<sup>52</sup>**

The consciousness of not intentional attitudes is a consciousness of the importance of the little thing and their impact on the big things. Evaluation can do a lot of damage in the learning field, and I guess in the mental health of a person. There is a very important connection between evaluation, memory and emotion.

**“Interest often involves forgiveness”<sup>53</sup>.**

Mutual interest implies changing the way in which you evaluate yourself and the others and the importance of our not intentional attitudes should be discussed with persons aware of the possibility of changing, as therapists, educators, scientists, and philosophers...

We have to change the script together of

**“A self-punishing machine that traps one in a shame bind.”<sup>54</sup> p.96**

**(...) « we are not only our memory : we do indeed have reason. We can learn and reason, and work with our memories and add to our**

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<sup>52</sup> LYNCH ibidem. P.74

<sup>53</sup> LYNCH, ibidem, p. 84

<sup>54</sup> LYNCH, ibidem, p.91



memories and learning through the here and now. We will learn and reason much better if we pay attention to the feelings associated with our memories. »<sup>55</sup>

In the learning field we have to act in the label “bad” or “the best” associated to feelings of shame and pride and associated to our memories:

- 1) **Maximize positive interpersonal emotion.** Through a fair and formative evaluation; one that allows people to achieve one’s goals, for instance in the ethical field with shared interest and enthusiasm.
- 2) **Minimize negative interpersonal emotion,** avoid shaming critics, moved by emotions of guilt, shame, disgust, dissmell, avoid self-punishment affects in order to please others.
- 3) **Minimize the inhibition of interpersonal emotion,**  
Have a neutral field, where express our true emotions: a sacred space as described by the American Indians, safe and calm, a meditative space, that allows the open dialogue, affective attunement and mutual interest in order to repair the damages of a learning disability script.

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<sup>55</sup> LYNCH, ibidem, p.101 LYNCH,

- 4) **Institute effective interpersonal processes that allow the first three rules to be used:** change our relationship to the evaluation procedure.

If we feel safe then we will be able to experience the plasticity of emotions and change the disability learning script. This is what I call “ the ART BODY”, a soul body capable of creating a new vision about him, her and others, that allow the persons to learn together.

**“I solve a problem by**

- a. **defining it**
- b. **evaluating it**
- c. **moderating it**
- d. **controlling it.”**<sup>56</sup>

So we could say that in order to achieve the plasticity of the learning script, that we need to recognize the labels that are due to self- punishing affects, based on our biographical complex memory feelings, and thanks to our mind plasticity and the help of others through successful experiences modifies the label “bad” or “ the best” in to the label “learning”

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<sup>56</sup> LYNCH, ibidem, p.101

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## ICONOGRAPHY

"*Rash*" sailors, (*China sea, November, 2013*). Original photography by Patrick Loisel worked again and put in space by the PLASTIR's editorial staff.