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The significance of emotions in teaching and learning: on making emotional significance

ALICE J. PITT and CHLOÉ BRUSHWOOD ROSE

We follow the insights of psychoanalytic theory to offer a way of thinking about emotional life in the classroom. Using three case studies, each of which illuminates an aspect of emotional difficulty in relation to learning and failing to learn, we argue that educators and educational leaders benefit from attending to and listening for difficulties in making emotional significance, that is, in refusing to separate affective and cognitive processes, in encounters with knowledge and with others.

The notion of emotional intelligence comes up frequently in our discussions with teacher educators, administrators and pre-service students. Teachers frequently insist that emotional intelligence must be cultivated in their classrooms. Administrators call upon teachers and those aspiring to become teachers to bring highly developed emotional intelligence into the profession where it can be further nurtured and developed with proper professional development. In either instance, emotional intelligence arrives with urgency and force, and one cannot help but believe that something extraordinary is being signalled. Even so, it is not easy to decide what that something is. So what are educators using the concept of emotional intelligence to do?

We believe that there are serious flaws with emotional intelligence and the diagnostic tools and educational programmes that spring from it, but we are also convinced that we need to pay attention to the issues associated with emotional intelligence. How educational leaders listen and respond to teachers' concerns has a direct impact on how those teachers respond to the difficulties of their students. Emotional intelligence is frequently mobilised as the only acceptable discourse for teachers grappling with the significance of emotions in the profession, classroom and curriculum. We offer some other ways of thinking and talking about emotions in teaching and learning and ask what if the emotions cannot be known, managed or made intelligent? How might emotional breakdowns not only be inevitable but also necessary in teaching and learning?

In our classes with beginning teachers and in meetings with our colleagues and other educational leaders we have observed emotional intelligence express several different, yet overlapping, worries. As one of the...
‘ways of knowing’ that flood educational discourse, influenced by the cognitive psychological theories of Howard Gardner (1983), emotional intelligence reminds us that one purpose of education in a democracy is to prepare individuals to take on their civic responsibility. Social and emotional maturity is a necessary aspect of civic belonging. An insistence on the importance of emotional intelligence draws attention to a curriculum overwhelmed by skills-based imperatives. It articulates the obligation teachers feel to attend to students’ emotional lives and development, an obligation for which it is increasingly difficult to clear a space.

Teachers’ work is always complex and difficult, but the combination of being held accountable for students’ success and recent philosophical and legal moves towards inclusive classrooms creates new conditions to which teachers and administrators need to respond. Adapting to these conditions means becoming adept at using a variety of diagnostic tools to identify individual learning needs, using the results of such tools to justify requests for additional classroom support and using the information embedded in psychological tests to plan appropriate and remedial learning experiences. In our view, emotional intelligence arrives just on time to contest the overweening reliance upon skills-based standardised testing, and it comes packaged so as to be intelligible to the evidence-based scientism that dominates the educational landscape. Goleman (1995), for example, drew heavily on psychological research to ground his claims and used familiar language to develop diagnostic tools and indicators.

There is surely an irony here: teachers have intimate knowledge of the ways that high stakes testing adversely affects the everyday of classroom life and everyone who spends time there. They know all too well the costs to their own quality of life of teaching to the test, keeping children on track and denying themselves and their students the pleasures of following the trail of the unanticipated wonder. Emotional intelligence is surely used as a way to both critique and respond to educational reforms, but we speculate that calls for ‘emotional intelligence’ also express teachers’ deeply felt pain and helplessness in the face of not only the new curricular demands, but also public attacks on teachers used to justify the scope of the reforms and the rapidity of their implementation. This is the irony—rather than calling attention to the limits of cognition’s ability to tell all that matters about human experience and learning, emotional intelligence takes its legitimacy from cognitive psychology and shores up its assumptions with appeals to advances in neuroscience. It is surely the role of leadership to distinguish between what educators want and need from emotional intelligence and what emotional intelligence training can provide.

We do not dispute the view that the work of growing up concerns identifying and regulating our own feelings, becoming capable of motivating ourselves and learning to recognise the feelings of others (Goleman 1995, Salovey and Mayer 1990). Adults necessarily participate in these developmental achievements, and much of the work that teachers do, whether they acknowledge it or not, already concerns the emotional life of individual children and the emotional dynamics of the classroom. This work is difficult to talk about at the best of times, but is particularly so when emotional life is seen as either irrelevant to learning or an obstacle to it. Emotional intelligence may appeal
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to educators because it responds to important worries without straining at or placing under scrutiny education’s dream of knowing what the problem is and how to solve it.

We suggest a different method for listening and responding to the vicissitudes of emotional life in the classroom. We do this not by diminishing emotional intelligence’s success at establishing itself as a representative of knowledge and providing real help for real children and adolescents. Rather, we approach our task by way of the failure of another psychological tradition, Freud’s depth psychology, to achieve comparable success.

Long before cognitive psychology identified this other intelligence as an important aspect of our cognitive process, Freud argued that emotion and cognition are inseparable, and the force of their interaction makes learning both possible and difficult (Freud 1914). In the early days of his psychoanalytic explorations Freud believed that the cure for neuroses lay in providing accurate knowledge as a correction to faulty answers to the questions that perplexed the child but that have come to plague the adult. Freud soon became dissatisfied with his efforts: whether a patient claimed to accept or reject his interpretations, there was no reliable change in the patient himself/herself in terms of a permanent alleviation of their suffering (Freud 1914). The truth value of the knowledge Freud provided turned out to be less significant than how it mattered to the patient—it was a problem of making emotional significance.

From the play between internal and external experiences we can elaborate the problem of making emotional significance in at least three ways. Once Freud realised the futility of his efforts to tell the truth to his patients he had to acknowledge that intimate relations between inner and outer reality do not readily give up their power, even when they are the source of distress (Freud 1920). Psychoanalysis refers to this first difficulty as the problem of resistance. Second, the problem of origins, where we come from, is lived in part as a difficulty in distinguishing what comes from the inside and what comes from the outside. This distinction between internal life and the external world is made in the interminable developmental achievement of reality acceptance. Finally, the difficulty of relinquishing imaginary constructions comes as a result of their attachment to our beloved and feared parental figures (Freud 1905). One key discovery of psychoanalysis as a therapeutic practice concerns the way that the emotional tenor of past experiences and self-other relations is projected onto the present in ‘transference’. Past and present, in this formulation, mingle endlessly, each informing the other in a nonlinear passage of time (Freud 1912).

This problem of making emotional significance and the intimate relations between cognition and affect can be approached through three small studies that elucidate the dynamics of resistance, origins and transference. These studies, which draw upon psychoanalytic writing and, in the third case, our teaching, bring clinical knowledge to bear upon the scene of education and the difficulties and pleasures of learning. We define clinical knowledge as follows:

The qualities of clinical knowledge made from clinical experience are central to psychoanalytic thinking, where the clinical case does not illustrate theory but is itself a form of theory and where
exploring the pathological, or the exaggerated and rough edges of experience, becomes a model for thinking more typically about everyday breakdowns in meaning. (Britzman and Pitt 2004: 357)

Where psychoanalytic case studies place the analyst’s difficulties side by side with those of the analysand, our studies bring psychoanalytic insights to bear upon the emotional difficulties of learning. Our method frustrates the search for definitive knowledge and precise solutions and understands Freud’s legacy as ‘a new way of working together that is not centred on the possibility of judging, but that enable[s] us to learn how to learn’. (Stengers 1997: 106)

‘Sum, I am’

Psychonanalyst and paediatrician Donald Winnicott was concerned about the limits of a purely intellectual life to sustain our efforts to make life worth living. In contrast to theories of emotional intelligence, Winnicott viewed emotional difficulties and the development of affective dynamics not as a question of individual perception and style, but as the result of our complex negotiations between interior life and external reality. Following Freud’s revised understandings of emotional significance, he saw affect as the psychical and relational dynamics that pervade and inform all experiences, cognitive and otherwise. In an address to mathematics teachers in 1968 Winnicott (1986) linked children’s emotional development to learning mathematics.

He connected his own work to that of his audience when he pointed out that ‘these matters that are the concern of the student of the human personality are also the concern of the mathematician’ (Winnicott 1986: 56). How is this so? Winnicott (1986: 56) said: ‘In a word, when I say that the central feature in human development is the arrival and secure maintenance of the stage of I AM, I know this is also a statement of the central fact of arithmetic, or … of sums’. The relation between this central feature of development and the central fact of arithmetic both revolve around the ‘one’ and so set the stage for a theory of learning that Winnicott (1986: 58) sketched out in this essay:

> arithmetic starts with the concept of one, and that this derives and must derive in every developing child from the unit self, a state that represents an achievement of growth, a state indeed that may never be achieved.

Securing the sense of ‘I am’ that permits mastering the operations involving whole numbers in such a way as to be part of making the self is less an operation of separation from the mother than it is the gradual realisation of the fact of separateness. Winnicott (1971) argued that the mother has enjoyed an existence prior to and in the absence of the child and that her interest in re-establishing contact with her own existence is necessary to her baby’s development of independence. Still, the idea that the mother has interests, pleasures and needs that do not centre upon or even include the baby is very difficult for the baby to experience and even more difficult to fashion as a site of security, pleasure and growth. The achievement of the unit self is accompanied by the gradual relinquishment of the fantasy of omnipotent control of the mother who, at least in the very early stages of life
and in ideal conditions, anticipates or responds very quickly to the baby’s needs, as quickly as is needed in order for this emergence of the sense of unit status not to come as too much of a shock altogether.

Winnicott (1986) recognized three states along a continuum of development of the sense of ‘I am’: (1) unit status has been achieved; (2) it has yet to be securely achieved; (3) the process of achieving it has been disrupted and growth is impaired. An example of the work required in the second state involves a child who loves and mourns the death of a mouse. It is through the loss of the mouse that the child may come to recognize both its separate existence and its wholeness as ‘one’. In gathering this information the child is doing some necessary emotional work that both contributes to her own achievement of ‘I am’ and prepares her to grasp mathematical concepts.

A child whose difficulties are of the order of the third state might have been a baby whose intellectual capabilities were above average. Winnicott (1986) described what happens when a baby gets hungry: the feeding must arrive within a definite though unspecified amount of time or it becomes meaningless to the baby. If the feeding comes too late it fills the tummy but does not serve as an answer to the baby’s call of need. A baby who is well endowed intellectually ‘soon gets to know from “noises off” that a feed is being prepared’ (Winnicott 1986: 58) and so predicts that the answer to the call is indeed on its way. Such a baby is less reliant on the mother’s capacity to adapt to her baby’s needs, but, according to Winnicott (1986: 59), this may not be a positive factor for healthy development. The split-off intellect may permit the accomplishment of school tasks, but there is, in his view, a tremendous cost in terms of the child’s diminished capacity for individual happiness, for deep and lasting relationships with others and for meaningful life and work.

Winnicott then turned to the continuum of development as it relates to mathematics. In deceptively simple terms he pointed out to his audience the familiarity they already have had with the variations in children’s achievement of primary wholeness:

When you teach sums, you have to teach children as they come, and certainly you will recognize the three types:

1. Those who start easily with one.
2. Those who have not achieved unit status and for whom one means nothing.
3. Those who manipulate concepts and who are held back by banal considerations of pounds, shillings and pence. (Winnicott 1986: 61, original emphasis)

The first child can enjoy the manipulations of mathematical operations, but the second child cannot: ‘What I think you must not expect is that a child who has not reached unit status can enjoy bits and pieces. These are frightening to such a child and represent chaos’ (Winnicott 1986: 61). Personal integration must precede the tackling of mathematical problems, and teachers support such activity when they treat children’s learning difficulties with calmness and patience. As for the third child, who does the work easily and perhaps even obsessively, Winnicott suggested that she is incapable of making emotional significance from her skill. Winnicott (1986) summed up his meditation on the relation between the achievement of unit status and activities involving basic operations such as addition and division by insisting that:
Teachers of all kinds do need to know when they are concerned not with teaching their subject, but with psychotherapy—that is, completing uncompleted tasks that represent parental failure or relative failure. The task I refer to here is one of giving ego support where it is needed. The opposite is to laugh at a child’s failures, especially when these represent fear of forward movement and triumph. (p. 63, original emphasis)

The separation of affect from cognition, what Winnicott described as the ‘split-off intellect’, rather than being a useful organisational framework or symptom of academic ability, is a serious problem for the individual and their capacity to live creatively. The idea that the child’s epistemological experience is primarily cognitive returns us to a theory of learning as determinable and progressive. Winnicott offered an implicit critique of this cognitive framework by insisting that our learning experiences are necessarily subjective, idiosyncratic and fundamentally affective, as well as cognitive. In his discussion of the split-off intellect Winnicott reminded us that the intellect alone cannot learn. Indeed, the student who can manipulate the most complex mathematical concepts and yet comes undone when faced with mundane and practical matters is a perfect example of this. Conversely, non-curricular experiences, such as the care of a mouse, may provide the framework for the child to learn or to ready himself/herself for learning in ways that we cannot always witness or assess.

**Time-out and time-in**

Winnicott focused squarely on the range of emotional resonances a subject such as mathematics has for children, and yet he refrained from providing the teachers in the audience with a clear idea about how they might use his ideas in their own practice. What are we to make of an invitation to become curious about children’s emotional life, if such curiosity is not put to the service of improving teaching or enhancing performance on the part of the learner? Winnicott did not answer this question beyond his reference to the importance of ‘giving ego support’, but a response can be crafted from his life-long concern with distinguishing between help that is useful and help that is experienced as coercion.

Child psychologist Otto Weininger (2002) helped us think about giving ego support and help that is useful. Weininger was interested in responding to the popularity of ‘time-out’ strategies for coping with children’s intense emotional and behavioural outbursts, ‘when children are “out of control”, defiant, or overwhelmed by strong emotions’ (2002: 21).

Weininger reminded us of the slipperiness of emotional life and the ways in which affect can be understood both as a form of resistance to and the grounds of possibility for knowledge. He reminded us that confusion, or knowing that we do not know something, while a necessary precursor to learning, is an intensely difficult experience that is often avoided by both children and adults through what is perceived to be a safer affective response. Weininger (2002: 48) described the case of a girl who was having difficulty learning to read:

As one eight-year-old girl said, ‘I can’t read the book, I don’t know how to read, and, I don’t care’. She is very angry and she’s afraid she might find out by reading what it is she is so angry
about—she is angry at herself for not being able to read. Being angry helps avoid the confusion she might experience if she tried to decode all those letters on the page.

We can see how knowing that she does not know how to read is necessary for this girl to begin learning how to read. And yet, the recognition that she ‘doesn’t know’ is intensely uncomfortable and perhaps emotionally painful for her. In fact, she would rather be angry and afraid than face her own uncertainty. Weininger’s example demonstrates in very simple terms how the cognitive processes fundamental to learning or coming to know, rather than being separate from the subject’s affective experiences, are always subject to those experiences and dynamics.

For Weininger, as for Freud and Winnicott, the only way one can move towards knowledge or develop the capacity to learn is to move through these experiences by trying to make some emotional significance of them. Of course, this is an interminable task, as the problems of resistance, transference and origins never cease to re-emerge. However, while the influence of affect is inevitable (as Freud’s failure demonstrates), Weininger argued that the failure to acknowledge the emotional intensity of daily human life by using ‘time-out’ can only further contribute to the child’s resistance.

For the girl who was having trouble learning to read the use of time-out by a parent or teacher to cope with her angry outburst only served to distance the child further from the confusion which was at the root of her emotional response. As Weininger (2002: 48) wrote:

"The anger a child feels not only avoids confusion, it can provide its own justification … . Having been sent to her room, the child feels rejected. She now does not have to worry about possible rejection—she has been rejected. Now her own anger is justified and no longer represents a threat; from her perspective, her rejection has given her every reason to feel angry. Now she can say, ‘Because I’m so angry, I don’t feel confused. I know I’m angry and I know why’.

In contrast, Weininger suggested that the ‘good enough’ parent or teacher can assist a child in making emotional significance by helping the child hold onto or contain her emotions:

"[Children] need their ‘original container’, that is, the parent who once held them when they were upset. Just as upset babies need to be picked up and held—‘contained’—by a safe parent who will try to soothe them, so do upset children. (Weininger 2002: 25)

By taking time-in, the adult is loaning the child a sense of competence and confidence with which they can feel and explore their emotional state. This helps the child defend against the fear that her emotions may overwhelm or destroy her. Weininger (2002: 34) described a teacher who used a particularly ingenious method to ‘loan her strength’ to children in her classroom:

"She had a finger-exerciser—a round object with protrusions that could be pushed in. She gave the exerciser to children when she noticed they were becoming upset, having difficulties with another child, or were simply bored. She told the class she had several finger-exercisers and she talked about how important they were to her … . I think that by offering something that was important to her, the teacher loaned the children her strength. She showed her confidence in them. ‘I am here’, she said, which also meant, ‘I know you won’t blow up. You will work out your feelings’ … . The children were having time-in with an object that was—to them—a part of their teacher."
In contrast to avoiding her students’ intense emotions or relegating them to a segregated space in which the child must be alone, the teacher in Weininger’s case study offered her students ego support that implicitly conveyed both the acceptability and necessity of their emotional responses. Unlike the understandable helplessness many teachers feel in the face of their students’ emotional outbursts, this teacher was able to tolerate the presence of affect as a necessary part of classroom learning. The students who benefited from their time spent with the teacher’s finger-exerciser were not unlike the student Winnicott described, for whom the care of a pet may be fundamental to the learning of mathematics.

In both of these cases we see the importance of making emotional significance through the bringing together of affect and cognition by recognising and tolerating the necessity of both for our capacity to know and learn. The making of emotional significance aims to understand the complex relationship between cognition and affect while acknowledging, like Freud, that our attempts at understanding will fail to ‘cure’ or control our emotional vicissitudes. This stands in sharp contrast to the making of emotional intelligence, which, as Goleman (1995) suggested, aims to subject affect to cognitive control. Both Winnicott and Weininger suggested that our ‘emotional storms’ (Eigan 2005) are an inevitable and necessary part of children’s and adults’ ability to know and learn.

**Emotional storms**

Our final case describes an event that occurred in one of our teacher education classrooms several years ago. In the year that Goleman (1995) published *Emotional Intelligence* a psychological test for sorting out personal work style, a derivative of the Meyer–Briggs test appealingly called ‘True Colours’, was popular in the schools in our area and was frequently introduced to our students early on in their programme. After students had participated in a workshop where the instrument had been administered, they were eager to discuss their experience in their social foundations course. Something was always revealed about the messy business of becoming a teacher in these discussions. In our view, however, we learned more about what we wished from the results of such an instrument than what it actually provided.

One student in this class was a mature woman born and raised in the Caribbean. She was one of very few black men and women in the course, which was held in a suburban community only beginning to show signs of diversity. She had been having a difficult time finding her feet in her practicum placement. Her mentors at her host school complained about her lack of punctuality, her lack of preparedness, her accent and her ‘teacher-centred’ approach to teaching. Her practicum supervisors did not think it likely that she would succeed in her practice teaching.

One day a heated argument broke out during the social foundations class. The older Caribbean woman and a younger white woman got into a heated yelling match over a reading about racism in Canada and the difficulty white Canadians have acknowledging it. Suddenly the white student hurled an unopened can of soda at the black student.
During a private meeting after this incident the black student explained that the reason she was having so much trouble on the programme—with her peers and in her practicum—was that, according to the True Colours instrument, she was a ‘blue’. Her interpretation of True Colours meant that her tendency to become emotionally overwhelmed in stressful situations was an obstacle to fulfilling her dream of becoming a teacher. Moreover, she felt that she should take responsibility for the fight, because it was her views that set the argument into motion. Her course directors had colluded with this student in perpetuating the view that emotions are other to that which is rational and, moreover, interfere with access to our cognitive capacities. Her emotional and thus irrational behaviour, rather than the complex race relations at play, were constructed as responsible for her inability to use what was offered as constructive criticism. This collusion was partially broken when the students in the group began to be able to see how the article they had been reading had, in fact, anticipated their argument in content and tone.

Conflicts such as this one are not uncommon in university classes. What is striking about this particular event for our purposes is how clearly it problematises the boundary between inside and outside. As Britzman and Pitt (2004: 355) observed, when confronting ‘pedagogical meltdowns’ in the classroom it is important to keep the following question in mind: ‘How does one tell the difference between responses to traumatic knowledge that defend against the effects of that knowledge and responses that are symptomatic of the breakdown or failure of those defenses?’ Or how do we know whether the emotional storm is a resistance to learning or a necessary part of learning? Sociologically minded educators might insist that the breakdown we have described here is emblematic of the former, with the white student refusing knowledge of her own implication in race privilege and racist actions and the black student feeling once more the pain of her status as a disparaged minority. However, the question asked by Britzman and Pitt highlights indeterminacy and can imagine a richer texture of the meeting between self and other and between inside and outside, where the student’s affective response is seen as an inevitable and necessary part of their experience of encountering the world.

‘When two personalities meet’, wrote W. R. Bion (2000: 321) ‘an emotional storm is created’. A storm can be painful or too intensely pleasurable, long and dulled at the edges or over in a flash of heat, but Eigen (2005: 4–5) shares with Bion the suspicion that we may be too ready to get them over with:

A specialty of psychoanalysis is focusing on unbearable emotions. Emotions are not simply unbearable because of taboos, repression, conflict, important as these are. Emotions are unbearable because we cannot take too much of ourselves … . We take for granted that social life requires hidden asocial aspects, hiding thoughts and feelings, rerouting them, perfuming communication, making self palatable, image over substance. We don’t want to taste too bad to ourselves, although psychic taste buds need challenge in order to evolve.

Eigen’s comments emphasize the rush to move on or to escape the storm. In the light of them we return to Bion’s statement about the meeting of two personalities. Read once more, from the vantage of our inevitable avoidance,
we can see that what is significant about the statement is the word ‘meet’. The emotional storm is the effect of meeting. Or, as Bion (2000: 321) wrote: ‘an emotional storm is created by the conjunction of these two individuals, and the resulting disturbance is hardly likely to be regarded as necessarily an improvement on the state of affairs had they never met at all’.

The storm created by the meeting of the two students disturbed them both, and it radiated its heat over the entire group. We survived the emotional storm and, indeed, may even have thrived because of it. It was too big of an explosion to sweep under the rug and it was too obviously the enactment of more than stress, personality conflict or racial power dynamics. The white student, who was as shocked as her classmates by her behaviour, became aware that her strong feelings served to propel her away from knowing about racism and her implication in it. The black student got a glimpse of her unruly emotions as worthy of her attention and as holding the potential for encountering personally difficult knowledge. Behind the scenes the team of instructors began to talk about the effects of our curricula as interfering with as well as permitting learning and about the importance of advocating on behalf of minority students. The making of emotional significance develops at the level of the individual. However, in this instance it also inaugurated important conversations about our curriculum and about the difficult work of learning.

Conclusion

The emotional dynamics of the classroom are difficult to talk about at the best of times, and these emotional storms can make those discussions even harder. When we give in to our sense of helplessness in the face of these ‘outbursts’ we make the choice to silence them, to give a ‘time-out’, to place emotional concerns into an intellectual framework that tames them and renders them safe. In contrast, the cases we describe here suggest a different method for listening and responding to the vicissitudes of emotional life in the classroom. In the emotional storm we describe above it was precisely an insistence on the relevance and necessity of the students’ emotional experience that made conversations about student learning and curriculum possible.

Bion described how difficult it is to weather the storm. The storm makers may, in his view, ‘decide to make the most of a bad job’ (Bion 2000: 321). Bion (2000: 322) argued that ‘the enemy’s object is so to terrify you that you cannot think clearly, while your object is to think clearly no matter how adverse or frightening the situation’. The wisdom of acting through the feeling of danger and of affecting others through one’s own fear, hostility, what have you, is, Bion suggested, suppressed throughout our history, discarded in favour of observable or scientific knowledge. Writing in 1979, Bion (2000: 331) wondered if Freud’s thought, which knows the value of the emotional storm, will be used to ‘study the living mind’ or if the resentment against its interest in listening to what emotions might be trying to convey and the circulation of affect between us will succeed in silencing it.

We have here explored the dynamics of resistance, the persistence of the search for origins and the displacement of emotional conflict onto new
situations as integral to the generative work of making emotional significance. Teachers and other educational leaders, like analysts, can provide much needed support as these dangerous and frightening dynamics are worked through. Earlier we speculated that teachers and leaders find this requirement frightening and that their appeal to emotional intelligence and emotional literacy expresses their helplessness, as well as their insistence upon the significance of the emotional world in classrooms and for learning. Educational leaders must be prepared to contain teachers’ anxieties, meet their emotional storms with courage and bring into conversation the emotional significance that can be discerned from anxiety and emotional storms. In so doing, educators participate in extending Freud’s legacy of learning how to learn.

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