An intelligent look at 

Emotional Intelligence

A publication commissioned by the Association of Teachers and Lecturers from Guy Claxton, Professor of the Learning Sciences, University of Bristol
The Association of Teachers and Lecturers’ Teaching to Learn campaign aims to put learning back at the heart of education policy and shift the debate about schools and schooling away from targets, tests and league tables, towards learning and the learner.

The Association of Teachers and Lecturers is calling for:

- an end to relentless testing
- recognition that learning is not just for meeting targets
- freedom for educators to enthuse and inspire learners.
We live in confusing times. On the one hand, teachers are being exhorted to ‘deliver’ a tightly-prescribed, one-size-fits-all curriculum, administer pre-packaged tests and rate children and young people according to levels and grades in prescribed subjects. The emphasis is firmly on the pragmatic, the practical and the measurable. On the other, there is an increasing emphasis on the more effective aspects of education, on personal and social development, on understanding what makes children and young people become effective learners and on personalising their learning experiences. The emphasis is shifting towards the emotional well-being of individuals and schools, on feelings as well as facts.

After well over a decade of top-down, mechanistic instrumentalism, it is right that the balance should shift towards a more human and humane view of what education should be about. It is essential to recognise that children and young people, their teachers and the wider school community, are first and foremost human beings, not automata. Seeking understandings of the human condition has always been important to those of us who work in education. It is for this reason I believe that the growing interest in Emotional Intelligence and emotional literacy in schools and colleges is an important development, and one which we cannot afford to ignore.

Perhaps surprisingly, a recent ATL survey revealed that over half of the 150 teachers who responded had not heard of Emotional Intelligence. Of those who were familiar with the concept, a clear majority saw it as ‘an important life skill’, ‘something that enhances learning’ and ‘something that helps promote well-being’. Even though nearly a third of the respondents believed that Emotional Intelligence is ‘an interesting but fuzzy concept’, only a handful saw it as ‘sentimental claptrap’ or ‘yet another fad that will blow over’. Importantly, not one of the respondents regarded Emotional Intelligence as ‘an intellectually rigorous concept’.

In commissioning this publication, it was ATL’s intention to shed more light on this ‘interesting but fuzzy’ concept and contribute to the growing body of knowledge in this area – some of which deserves to be challenged. Rather than merely accepting that Emotional Intelligence is necessarily a ‘good thing’, our aim was to take a critical, analytical and intelligent approach – to get behind the rhetoric and the golden words, to examine the instant appeal and apparent self-evident worth of the concept, and to explore what it might mean for schools and colleges.

Guy Claxton brings to this publication a wealth of experience, knowledge and insight. As a psychologist, he informs us of a body of knowledge which should not be ignored when considering Emotional Intelligence. As an academic he reminds us of the discipline and critical thinking we need to apply when approaching a new concept. As a widely-acclaimed and popular author, he brings a style of writing which is simultaneously accessible, questioning and, where appropriate, humorous. Most important of all, he suggests to readers ways in which an intelligent approach to Emotional Intelligence can contribute to the learning environment in schools.

Dr Mary Bousted
ATL general secretary
AN INTELLIGENT LOOK AT EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE
Guy Claxton for ATL

‘Emotional Intelligence’ and ‘emotional literacy’ are ideas that have leapt to prominence in education (as well as in business and elsewhere) over the last ten years. Publications and courses now abound. Pressure groups for emotional well-being speak with confident voices, sometimes sounding as if their views on emotional development were beyond question.

The Government feels it perfectly natural to issue advice on young people’s ‘emotional health and well-being’, and on the cultivation of ‘social, emotional and behavioural skills’. It is impossible to be unaware of these pressures, and quite hard to be critical, or even sceptical, of them. Yet some people are beginning to voice misgivings and raise questions. Perhaps it is time to draw breath, after the initial decade of enthusiasm, and ask whether we have yet developed the most powerful, accurate, practical and intelligent version of ‘Emotional Intelligence’ it is possible to have. In this publication, ATL aims to help teachers think through the issues concerning young people’s developing emotionality, and to clarify for themselves how they feel it is best to engage with the concept of Emotional Intelligence. Of course, this aspect of development is important. It is precisely because it is so important that it is vital to support it as well as we can, and to be continually striving to question and improve our efforts to do so.

The publication is divided into four parts. The first summarises the ‘facts of the matter’, by asking:

- Why is Emotional Intelligence so popular at the moment?
- How did the concept of Emotional Intelligence develop?
- How is Emotional Intelligence defined?
- How is Emotional Intelligence measured?
- How do you teach Emotional Intelligence?

Part II reviews some of the more critical questions that are being asked about Emotional Intelligence by scientists and practitioners alike. These include:

- Is Emotional Intelligence new (or is it old wine in new bottles)?
- Is it unitary and coherent as an idea (or is it a mishmash)?
- Does ‘teaching’ it work (what is the evidence)?
- Is it entirely ‘healthy’ (or is there good reason to have moral qualms)?
- Is the idea rich enough (or does it ‘dumb down’ discussions of emotion)?

Part III pursues the last question of Part II by looking briefly at new ways in which cognitive neuroscientists are thinking about emotion, and contrasts their views of emotions as biologically useful and functional, with some simplistic versions of Emotional Intelligence theory which make crude and misleading distinctions between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ emotions.

The concluding part sums up by:

- contrasting some of the more naive versions of Emotional Intelligence with those that are more well-founded and realistic
- offering some practical principles and ideas by which we think teachers interested in this area should steer, and
- suggesting where and how people can explore this vital area of education in more depth.
PART ONE: THE RISE OF EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE

Why Emotional Intelligence now?

“Let no emotions of the flesh, be they of pain or of pleasure, affect the supreme and sovereign portion of the soul – reason.” Marcus Aurelius.

“Never again will I do anything for anyone that I do not feel directly from my heart.” Oprah Winfrey.

The strong appeal of concepts like ‘Emotional Intelligence’ reflects a shift in social attitudes generally, as well as in education. Fifty years ago, the idea that abstract rationality was the epitome of human intelligence was still widely accepted. The law courts acted as if reasoned argument between clever men was the best way to get at the truth, while public and grammar schools esteemed analytical discussion, based on sound knowledge, above all other forms of ‘intelligence’. Indeed, it seemed as if there were no other forms.

Now these assumptions are under attack from many quarters. Those learned legal deliberations have resulted all too often in grievous miscarriages of justice. Feminist and other philosophers have argued that the guise of ‘objectivity’ is often a mask for patriarchal and other forms of self-interest. Widely-read accounts of neuroscience, such as neurologist Antonio Damasio’s best seller Descartes’ Error, have shown that emotion is the constant counterpart of reason – not its antagonist. Soap operas and reality TV pose (seemingly) endlessly fascinating questions about what is ‘emotionally intelligent’ behaviour and what is not. Taking advantage of counselling and psychotherapy no longer carries the risk of social stigma that it did. And the idea that Emotional Intelligence counts for more in life than intelligence quotient (IQ) has achieved almost mythic status.

The interest in Emotional Intelligence within education has been fuelled by other concerns and observations as well. The idea that ‘academically inclined’ is the same thing as ‘intelligent’ is seen to denigrate non-academic talents and interests – to the detriment of individuals and their communities. Yet at the same time much is made of the fact that role models of ‘success’ in our society frequently did badly at school.

In school, young people’s emotions are much more present in classrooms – and playgrounds – than they used to be. For example:

• With what sociologists call the ‘decline of deference’ (and what teachers simply label as ‘bad behaviour’), pupils and students bring more of their complicated emotional selves into the classroom with them.

• Living with the consequences of ‘inclusion’, teachers are sometimes faced with challenging behaviour and displays of strong emotion that they struggle to know how to deal with.
Many teachers are familiar with research on bullying which shows that bullies are often incapable of empathy: they are simply unable to imagine how their victim feels – and teachers are interested in what might be done to remedy this lack of imagination.

In multicultural classrooms, teachers may find that they have to learn new ways of reading unfamiliar emotional signals. An avoidance of eye contact may be a symbol of respect for authority in one culture, yet feel to a teacher more like ‘dumb insolence’, and mistaken interpretations can be costly.

But there is more than just ‘getting by’ involved. Many teachers have the strongly-held view that there is more to learning than the traditional curriculum, based on the ‘acquisition of knowledge, skills and understanding’, allows for. They are dissatisfied with models of education that merely supplement the old-fashioned academic preoccupation with a narrowly economic or utilitarian one. Whether they admit to ‘stress’ or not, teachers know how important emotions, and the way they deal with them in their own lives, can be. And they feel that, if there are things to be learned about how to be emotionally adept, then education should be helping young people to learn them. All in all, the case for bringing Emotional Intelligence into education seems an irresistible one.

A brief history of Emotional Intelligence: what is Emotional Intelligence and how did it come about?

In 1966, a German psychiatrist named Leuner wrote an article called ‘Emotional Intelligence and emancipation’ in which he hypothesised that the reason some women wilfully rejected the social roles and responsibilities that were expected of them was because of their ‘low Emotional Intelligence’. As a cure, he prescribed a combination of LSD-induced hallucinatory ‘trips’ and psychotherapy.

Since that inauspicious start, both the idea of Emotional Intelligence, and the term itself, have come a long way. In 1983, Harvard developmental psychologist Howard Gardner published a book called Frames of Mind in which he argued that the dominant forms of intelligence associated with linguistic, logical and mathematical ability should be supplemented by five (later seven) others. The new intelligences included (as well as musical, spatial and kinaesthetic intelligences), interpersonal and intrapersonal intelligence. Interpersonal intelligence was defined as ‘the ability to understand people, what motivates them, how they work, how to work cooperatively with them’; while intrapersonal intelligence involved ‘access to one’s own feeling life’, and ‘the capacity to form an accurate, veridical model of oneself, and to be able to use that model to operate effectively in life’. By picking out human abilities like emotional self-awareness, empathy and social skills, placing them alongside the traditional virtues of literacy and numeracy, and giving them the high-status designation of ‘intelligences’, Gardner legitimised their claim on teachers’ time and attention.
In 1990, researchers Jack Mayer, Peter Salovey and their colleagues published two articles that introduced the term ‘Emotional Intelligence’ itself into mainstream American psychology. And then, in 1995, came psychology journalist Daniel Goleman’s best seller *Emotional Intelligence*. Goleman brought together the existing body of Emotional Intelligence research with an introduction to how emotion works in the brain, and added some practical examples of how ‘Emotional Intelligence’ was being cultivated in schools and workplaces around the USA. In this 1995 version, Goleman cherry-picked bits of both Gardner’s and Mayer and Salovey’s definitions to put together his own version of Emotional Intelligence, comprising knowing one’s emotions, managing one’s emotions, motivating oneself, recognising emotions in others, and handling relationships skilfully.

By 1998, however, in the follow-up *Working with Emotional Intelligence*, Goleman had decided to go for the kitchen-sink approach. Now Emotional Intelligence expanded to include, amongst many other things, ‘self-confidence’, ‘trustworthiness’, ‘initiative’, ‘optimism’ ‘political awareness’, ‘leadership’ and ‘influence and negotiation skills’. Almost everything we might possibly want in, to use Goleman’s phrase, a ‘successful person’ is there, in other words – except the traditional educational concerns of literacy, numeracy, analytical thinking and knowledge about the world.

Given many educators’ dissatisfaction with the extent to which schools were in thrall to these latter concerns, it is easy to see why ‘Emotional Intelligence’ struck such a chord. On the one hand the phrase offered a tantalising and eye-catching oxymoron. ‘Emotional’ pointed at some of the human qualities most conspicuously missing from the mainstream curriculum, while ‘intelligence’ seemed to borrow the credibility of earlier, apparently scientifically-based, uses of the word. No longer was a concern with ‘feelings’ something rather suspect, marginal or ‘touchy-feely’; it now had an air of intellectual legitimacy, and scientific clout, of its own. ‘Emotional Intelligence’ sounded simultaneously respectable, subversive and intriguing. It was a winner.

How does Emotional Intelligence relate to other terms like ‘well-being’ and ‘emotional literacy’?

In the UK, ‘Emotional Intelligence’ has taken its place alongside a range of other terms that cover more or less the same territory but which may feel more congenial to British sensibilities. They include:

- ‘health’, as in ‘emotional health and well-being’, and a ‘mentally and emotionally healthy school’
- ‘social, emotional and behavioural skills’ (we are keen on the idea of ‘skills’ here in the UK, even going so far as to have a government department not just of ‘education’ but of ‘education and skills’)
- ‘personal, social (health) and emotional education’ (‘emotional’ having been added to the PS(H)E formulation relatively recently
- ‘emotional literacy’.

The latter term, ‘emotional literacy’, has been widely used in the UK, sometimes being preferred to ‘Emotional Intelligence’, perhaps by those who feel that the use of the word ‘intelligence’ undermines rather than buttresses their concerns. For some, ‘literacy’ connotes both the importance of being
able to articulate feelings, and (by association with phrases like ‘critical literacy’) the intention to ‘empower’ young people emotionally, and not just ‘teach’ or ‘train’ them.

In practice, however, when the terms are unpacked both conceptually and practically, there seems little to differentiate emotional literacy from Emotional Intelligence (though people who feel strongly attached to one or the other will naturally disagree). The high degree of overlap is illustrated by comparing Goleman’s unpacking of Emotional Intelligence with Katherine Weare’s definition of emotional literacy, in her 2004 book *Developing the Emotionally Literate School*, as:

> the ability to understand ourselves and other people, and in particular to be aware of, understand and use information about the emotional states of ourselves and others with competence. It includes the ability to understand, express and manage our own emotions, and respond to the emotions of others, in ways that are helpful to ourselves and others.

Antidote, a UK organisation that campaigns for emotional literacy, defines it as ‘the practice of thinking individually and collectively about how emotions shape our actions, and of using emotional understanding to enrich our thinking.’ (Antidote 2003; emphasis added).

It is interesting that this definition asserts strongly the primacy of thinking within emotional literacy. If there is a different emphasis here from Goleman’s it is in the strong (and perhaps surprising) rationalist assumption that thinking – thinking about emotions and thinking enriched by emotions – is the key to enhanced emotional competence. However, I shall continue to use ‘Emotional Intelligence’ to refer to all deliberate attempts to boost or direct young people’s emotional development.

**How do you ‘teach’ Emotional Intelligence?**

Emotional Intelligence departs from traditional conceptions of intelligence in two ways. First, as we have seen, it values different ways of being bright. It asserts that understanding someone else’s point of view, or knowing how to deal with stress, are forms of intelligence, just as useful – indeed, quite possibly more so – than being able to solve logical brainteasers fast under pressure.

The second difference is just as important. Where many versions of IQ theory focus on its fixed, even inherited, character, Emotional Intelligence focuses on the extent to which emotional competence can be developed. Whereas a child of ‘low (intellectual) ability’ tends to be seen as a prisoner of their genes, Emotional Intelligence is of interest to so many teachers because they believe they can do something to help.
What kinds of activities and practical ideas are schools making use of, in order to try to expand young people’s Emotional Intelligence? There are many publications that seek to disseminate such ideas, including Julia Bird and Lynne Gerlach’s very useful review, *Promoting Emotional Health and Well-being*, published by the DfES. There follows just a selection of school and classroom techniques that are being used, some general and some quite specific, to illustrate the approach.

- **Circle Time**, in which young people are able to share emotionally charged issues that concern them, and are coached in positive ways of listening and responding to each other.

- **Explicit lessons on ‘social, emotional and behavioural skills’**, during PSHE or Citizenship time, for example, making use of role play and other techniques.

- **Students or pupils ‘checking in’** in the morning, during the taking of the register, for example, by responding with a number or a colour that corresponds to their level of alertness or their mood.

- **Training some young people in ‘negotiation’ or ‘conflict resolution’ skills**, which they make use of in dealing with playground disputes.

- **Setting quizzes** that encourage emotional reflection and self-knowledge (‘How optimistic are you?’).

- **Teaching explicit techniques such as ‘calming’ or ‘stilling’** that enable children to stop and think in the heat of the moment and so avoid inflaming situations. (In one method, youngsters are taught the sequence ‘Stop! Keep calm! Take five deep breaths! Praise yourself for doing well!’)

At an organisational level, school managers are being encouraged to adopt policies and procedures that create an ‘emotionally literate’ climate or ethos. For example, one UK LEA issues this guidance to its schools on what an emotionally intelligent school (and LEA) looks and feels like. It:

- listens to those it serves;
- provides many opportunities for face-to-face contact;
- shares ideas and vision;
- takes emotional literacy of candidates into account when making appointments; and
- (ensures that) there is a range of different personal skills and qualities in the team.

The same document explains that leadership in an Emotional Intelligence organisation involves encouraging all members to pursue Emotional Intelligence policies, and ‘walking the talk’, i.e. modelling the skills and attitudes of emotional literacy in their own conduct and dealings with both staff and students.
How is Emotional Intelligence measured?

If Emotional Intelligence is to be taken seriously as a complement to more familiar ‘measures’ of intelligence such as IQ, it has to be measured. Basically there are two ways to do this: self-report measures and performance measures. You can ask people to rate themselves, using various kinds of interview or questionnaire to elicit their self-reports. Or you can give them things to do, and see how well they do them.

As they are easier and cheaper to devise and deliver, there have been many more attempts to devise self-report measures than performance ones. One of the first, and still most widely-used is the Emotional Quotient Inventory, EQ-I, of Israeli psychologist Reuven Bar-On. The EQ-I divides Emotional Intelligence into five components, each assessed by a different sub-scale. Drawing on Howard Gardner’s terminology, Bar-On calls these intrapersonal intelligence (which contains self-awareness, self-esteem and assertiveness); interpersonal intelligence (empathy, social responsibility and social awareness); adaptability (problem-solving, reality testing and flexibility); stress management (stress tolerance and impulse control); and general mood (happiness and optimism). Respondents indicate the extent to which they agree or disagree with a range of statements designed to tap these qualities, and the replies are statistically aggregated into scores and sub-scores in the normal psychometric ways.

As we have seen in this brief introduction, Emotional Intelligence is a broad church. This is both an advantage and a drawback. On the one hand, it recruits and draws together a wide range of concerns, and seems to offer a way of tackling them. On the other, that same catholicism makes Emotional Intelligence very hard to pin down and evaluate. But nevertheless it is important to try.

“Where many versions of IQ theory focus on its fixed, even inherited, character, Emotional Intelligence focuses on the extent to which emotional competence can be developed.”
In Part II we take a critical look at some of the claims for Emotional Intelligence, and at some of the implicit assumptions that some Emotional Intelligence writers and practitioners make. Let me repeat: many of the concerns that motivated the development of Emotional Intelligence are legitimate and important. But have we got the ideas, and the measures and practices that flow from them right yet? I doubt it. Should we treat current practice as definitive? Certainly not. Pioneers like Goleman helped to ask new questions, and open up new avenues for thought, and they should be honoured for that. But those who follow have the right, and the duty, to question whether the pioneers’ first thoughts are also the last word. It is a part of Emotional Intelligence, perhaps, to see that being critical is not the same thing as being unsympathetic.

Is Emotional Intelligence measurable?

As we were on the subject of measurement, let’s start with that. Measuring Emotional Intelligence is no easier than measuring any other human quality. Not surprisingly there are different kinds of problems with each of the two methods: self-report and performance. Self-reports are easy to administer and score but you can never be sure that your respondents’ self-awareness is faultless, nor that they are free of the desire to give you the picture that makes them look good, or the one they think you want. People’s self-knowledge is notoriously shaky. In particular, students’ ability to estimate their own level of ‘intelligence’, emotional or otherwise, has been shown to be rather poor. Most teachers will have in their classrooms some youngsters (not only boys) who confidently overestimate their ability, and others (not always girls) whose ability is high, but who are so self-critical or insecure that they do not believe it. And it is also well-known that people are much more variable across time and context than their self-reports suggest. Performance measures on the other hand are much harder to administer, and harder to interpret, though they do try to get at what people actually do, rather than just what they say they do. And again, if you give them bite-size laboratory tasks to perform, you can never be sure that the way they go about them is really representative of how they behave in real-life situations.

Unfortunately, if you measure a person’s Emotional Intelligence in these different ways, the correlation between the two seems disappointingly low. In one recent study, Edinburgh psychologist Elizabeth Austin gave people an Emotional Intelligence questionnaire, and then involved them in a game where they had to name the emotional expressions on photographed faces. ‘Recognising emotions in others’ is claimed to be a key facet of Emotional Intelligence, so people who revealed high levels of Emotional Intelligence on the questionnaire (‘I find it easy to read other people’s facial expressions’) really should also do well – be faster and more accurate – in the emotion-naming test.

“The positive side of the (Emotional Intelligence) movement is that it helps broaden our concept of intelligence... The negative side of the movement is that it is often crass, profit-driven, and socially and scientifically irresponsible.” Professor Robert Sternberg, Yale University.
However, Austin found no correlation between task performance and overall Emotional Intelligence score, and only a small correlation with the Emotional Intelligence subscale that relates specifically to ‘the appraisal of emotion’.

Is Emotional Intelligence new?

It remains uncertain whether there is anything to Emotional Intelligence that psychologists working within the fields of personality, intelligence and applied psychological research do not know already.

Matthews, Zeidner and Roberts, Emotional Intelligence: Science and Myth.

Some people, in their enthusiasm, seem to think that humankind did not become aware that people have different social and emotional attitudes and capabilities until 1995. Luckily for us, psychologists (not to mention the poets, playwrights and artists of the last 3,000 years) have not been quite so slow on the uptake. In 1920, pioneering psychologist E.L. Thorndike distinguished between what he called ‘scholastic’, ‘mechanical’ and ‘social’ intelligence, the latter being ‘the ability to understand and manage people and act wisely in social contexts.’ In the 1960s another famous student of intelligence, J.P. Guilford, identified forms of intelligence that involved processing information about one’s own internal states and moods as well as those of other people. And we have already noted the seminal influence on the burgeoning Emotional Intelligence field of Howard Gardner’s Frames of Mind. As with much of psychology, we often find ourselves rediscovering what has gone before, rather than making ground-breaking discoveries for the first time.

Emotional Intelligence often lumps together so many different characteristics that overall it becomes indistinguishable from tests of ‘personality’. Tried and tested questionnaires have for a century or more assessed qualities such as hostility, aggression, impulsiveness, positive emotions, straightforwardness and self-discipline, to name just a few. So it is not surprising that empirical studies reveal that tests of general ‘personality’ correlate highly with tests of Emotional Intelligence. Tests of Emotional Intelligence are currently being developed which are more precise, and some of these do seem to be measuring something new. But for the moment we have to agree with the view of John Mayer, one of the originators of the term ‘Emotional Intelligence’: ‘The overlap of the mixed (Emotional Intelligence) scales with traditional personality traits is so high that… nothing new is measured by such self-report approaches relative to existing scales.’
We must also remember that Emotional Intelligence is by no means the first attempt to help people learn how to live happier, more fulfilled lives. All kinds of agencies were dealing with these issues long before Emotional Intelligence came on the scene. Churches, youth clubs, outward bound courses, social workers, educational psychologists – not to mention parents, extended families and local communities – have been in the ‘emotional education’ game for a long time. As Gerald Matthews et al remind us: ‘We must ask what… Emotional Intelligence can add to these efforts, other than a cheerleading function that raises a flag for the importance of emotion in real life.’

In schools, we might also remember that the humanities have long been helping young people to become more thoughtful and articulate about emotions. From The Cat in The Hat via The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time to Macbeth and The Color Purple, teachers have been using literature and the arts as powerful tools to help young people learn about ‘delayed gratification’, ‘empathy’, ‘risk-taking’ and the like. Perhaps what has changed is that the subtle indirectness of looking at emotional life in the mirror of a story has been replaced (or supplemented) by the attempt to deal with it head-on, and ‘up close and personal’. But we should not forget the power of the indirect route in showing evocative models, and letting you think and learn without having to put yourself explicitly in the frame – and thus run the risk of suffering self-consciousness or embarrassment. I know of no evidence that compares the effectiveness of emotional education through the direct (Emotional Intelligence) and indirect (humanities) routes.

Does Emotional Intelligence really exist?

The jury is still out as to whether or not there is a scientifically meaningful concept of Emotional Intelligence.

Professor Seymour Epstein, University of Massachusetts.

Is there really such a thing as ‘Emotional Intelligence’, from which all its various manifestations – empathy, optimism, self-regulation and so on – naturally flow? Or are these separate traits that have been lumped together for convenience, but which have no more connection than pieces of chalk and cheese that happen to find themselves in the same basket? If the former, the separate traits should correlate with each other, and also educating some should help them all. If the latter, there is much less reason to expect either co-variation or automatic generalisation of development.

Both common sense and research must incline us to the latter view. Goleman’s Emotional Intelligence, for example, contains both ‘hope’ – an optimistic orientation to the future – and ‘impulse control’ – the ability to sacrifice an immediate benefit in the interests of long-term gain. But there is no good reason why they should co-vary. Can I not be hopeful, and also grab the last cake or be both highly controlled and also pessimistic? More broadly, are there not con artists and sociopaths – real-life Hannibal Lecters – who are extremely good at reading and anticipating other people’s emotional reactions, yet are highly Machiavellian and unscrupulous?
How do we reconcile these traits, if they really are aspects of the same thing? Professor Adrian Furnham and colleagues at University College London have identified as many as fifteen separate ingredients of ‘Emotional Intelligence’ in common parlance. It would be amazing if they did all go together – and they don’t. Emotional Intelligence is a collection of concepts. So if we are serious about teaching Emotional Intelligence, we have to attend separately to its many components. We can’t do a few questionnaires and exercises, and hope that we have ‘done it’ – because there is no ‘it’.

Is Emotional Intelligence the key to life (or school) success?

I speculate that teachers love notions such as Emotional Intelligence… because they appeal to their otherwise laudable liberalism and reaction against notions of a genetically determined single intelligence. The problem is that these under-conceptualised notions are often accepted uncritically as cure-alls for educational, and in particular, behavioural problems. Worse, they are sometimes used as management tools.

Professor Philip Adey, King’s College London.

Daniel Goleman’s most famous claim is that Emotional Intelligence predicts success in life – and particularly at work – more powerfully than does IQ. But this claim is built on sand. When Goleman produced his ‘evidence’, it turned out to be based on the ratio of ‘emotional-intelligence related criteria’ to intellectual or technical criteria in a sample of job advertisements. This may tell us something about the values and mindsets of the people who write adverts; it does not, however, tell us anything about the relationship between someone’s level of empathy and how much money they make or how good their relationships are.

Goleman also likes to invoke the stereotype of the socially dysfunctional intellectual – the egghead who can’t talk to his children – to emphasise the importance of Emotional Intelligence. Yet there is little evidence for it, and Stephen Hastings, in a recent article in the Times Educational Supplement concludes: ‘the stereotype of the genius who shows incredible intellectual abilities but is unable to relate socially is rare’.

In terms of other evidence for the relationship between Emotional Intelligence and various measures of ‘life success’, the news is mixed. People with very low scores on Emotional Intelligence tests are indeed more likely to be involved in substance abuse, more at risk of eating disorders, more likely to suffer from panic attacks, have a greater tendency to violence, and have more severe problems in relationships.
At the lowest levels on the scale, the inability to differentiate and articulate emotions becomes an identified psychiatric condition with its own label: ‘alexithymia’. In school, amongst students with low IQ, those with higher Emotional Intelligence, as judged by self-report questionnaires, perform considerably better than do those with lower Emotional Intelligence. However, the correlations are evident only at the lowest levels of intelligence, be it IQ or EQ. The fact that you seem to need a certain amount of Emotional Intelligence to function does not necessarily mean the more of it the better.

Is Emotional Intelligence important for learning?

A central concern for teachers is the effect of emotions on learning. Emotional Intelligence writers commonly recycle a number of familiar observations. They remind us that it is hard for students to concentrate on their schoolwork if they are tired, hungry, scared or angry. So sleep, breakfast, an anti-bullying policy or an anger-management course are all good ideas. There is much that is hard to disagree with, though it is hardly news. But underneath the truisms lie some more interesting issues.

It is commonly assumed that to learn, students have to ‘feel good about themselves’ or ‘have good self-esteem’. The Emotional Literacy Handbook, published by Antidote, for example, quotes approvingly the slogan ‘Feel good, Learn good!’, and takes that to imply, also, that ‘not feel good’ means ‘not learn good’. But while an anxious student may be learning less of what you would like, that does not mean they are learning nothing at all. As we shall see in Part III, emotions do not block learning, they direct it. Students who are feeling apprehensive, angry, sad or in love are all learning different things.

Indeed, we sometimes learn things better when we are in an emotional state. People remember emotionally-laden stories better than they do neutral ones. And if the part of the brain that registers fear, the amygdala, for example, is blocked by a specific drug (propanolol), then the advantage of the evocative material is lost. Neuroscientists have also shown that a certain level of stress hormone in the brain actually improves memory. And so on. The simple generalisation that the less ‘negative emotion’ we are feeling, the better will be our memory and learning, just isn’t true. Conversely, ‘feeling good’ can sometimes lead to worse learning. Australian research has found that when we are happy, we are more creative, but less careful, in the way we think and perceive; while feeling a little bit apprehensive or irritated makes us more critical, and also makes us more attentive to detail. For example, judgements of other people’s performance contain more errors and distortions when people are in a good mood! So different emotional tinges to learning lead us to attend and think in different ways, and which is ‘best’ depends not on some half-baked, sentimental idea, but on what the job is. (It would be very interesting, and perfectly possible, for teachers to play with this idea in their lessons.)
You could just as well argue that the causal link between self-esteem and learning goes in the other direction. If we focus on helping students be successful learners, won’t their self-esteem go up as a result? The renowned American psychologist Carol Dweck has argued, on the basis of her extensive research, that ‘self-esteem’ is much more potent when it is ‘won through striving whole-heartedly for worthwhile ends, rather than derived from praise’, especially praise that may be only loosely related to actual achievement.⁴⁵

We might also ask whether there is at least a risk, in some situations, that too much attention to students’ emotions might make them more sensitive to disruption, more easily put off learning by their own fluctuating feelings, rather than less. Surely there is a complicated, momentary, intuitive balance that teachers are continually having to strike between stopping to attend to the feelings, and encouraging a child to ‘just get on with it’? Some Emotional Intelligence enthusiasts seem to have lost touch, at least in their writing, with this self-evident complexity, and with the fact that the requisite sensitivity only comes with experience. They seem to want to replace slow, rich learning with an instantly transformative sound-bite.

Here’s another over-simplification. The inclination to be ‘persistent’ or ‘resilient’ in the face of difficult learning is often quoted in the Emotional Intelligence literature as a virtue to be cultivated, and up to a point it is. Automatically breaking off as soon as you can’t do something (because you think that means you’re stupid) is not going to get you very far. Yet you could also argue that knowing when to quit, and what not to bother with at all, are also very useful capacities. The person who has not yet learned that you are allowed to abandon a book half-read, if it is not giving you the pleasure or the information you hoped for, is an inefficient learner, and needs to develop a little less persistence, or at least a bit more discernment.

We might also note that trying to create a safe, supportive environment that enables students to get on with their (school-focused) learning is not the same thing at all as trying to create an environment in which youngsters’ ability to persist in the face of difficulty, listen to others or control their frustration is being systematically developed. That is much more demanding, and no-one yet has any clear understanding of how to do it. And it does the Emotional Intelligence case no favours if the promise of ‘emotional development’ shrinks in reality to an anti-bullying policy or a platitude like ‘every child matters’.⁴⁶

And what, finally, of the more subtle flux of emotions that learning involves? The tantalising feeling of almost grasping something that refuses to clarify itself? The vertiginous delight of a conversation where you are flying with someone into unknown territory, and dare not look down for fear of falling? The frustration of not being able to say what you mean, or formulate what it is you need to know? Are these not of as much interest or relevance as ‘feeling good’?
Is Emotional Intelligence education realistic?

Some of the Emotional Intelligence literature is stronger on good intentions than it is on solid practical advice. One could perhaps be forgiven for being a little puzzled and disappointed to be told, in The Emotional Literacy Handbook’s chapter on “strategies”, for example, that ‘people often ask what works in promoting emotional literacy. The answer we give is that everything works and nothing works’. While in Katherine Weare’s Developing the Emotionally Literate School we learn that emotionally literate teachers:

- are high on self-regard, self-knowledge, emotional awareness and the ability to manage their own emotions…
- are aware of the influence of their own emotions, and set clear professional boundaries between themselves and students…
- are emotionally resilient, with a high tolerance of stress…
- have strong relationship skills and positive attitudes towards others, celebrators of others’ success and infectiously optimistic…
- are trustworthy, authentic, honest, clear, and their behaviour congruent with what they claim to believe.

I’m afraid I would consider it a lifetime’s work even to begin to approach this ideal, and would need a lot more practical guidance about how to go about it than many such books are able to provide.

The testimony of people who have spent years ‘working on themselves’, through workshops and trainings of various kinds, is that it takes years, and a high level of discipline and commitment, to get anywhere. And there is evidence that, even then, it is quite possible to become more ‘emotionally literate’ without becoming either a happier or a nicer person. Even briefer, more focused forms of ‘emotional re-education’ such as ‘cognitive behavioural therapy’, or CBT, if they are to be successful, take a well-motivated client around 20 hour-long sessions with a highly-trained professional, plus concerted practice in between. Would this be appropriate to offer in schools? And if not, what exactly are we offering? Is there a risk of offering only a kind of Emotional Intelligence-lite that is acceptable only because it does not do what is required to be effective?

Does Emotional Intelligence education work?

Do attempts to develop young people’s Emotional Intelligence actually work? The truth is that, up till now, the evaluation of Emotional Intelligence has been very patchy. A good many evaluative studies have been carried out in the USA, and a few of these have been well designed, with both before and after measures, and control groups included. However, it seems as if the majority of the US programmes that have been tested are rather different from many of those that are of interest to teachers in the UK.

Part two: Critical questions about Emotional Intelligence
In the US version of *Emotional Intelligence*, there is often a strong, explicit concern to reduce both ‘behaviour problems’, and various kinds of social risk. The Collaborative to Advance Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL), the largest clearing house in the US for research and information in this area, offers a model of an ‘integrated approach’ to Emotional Intelligence which emphasises ‘synergy’ between the following concerns: ‘suicide prevention, chemical dependency prevention, teen pregnancy prevention, school-based delinquency and stress prevention, and AIDS education’. Most US programmes incorporate a ‘health education’ curriculum, as well as the kinds of Emotional Intelligence methods described above. CASEL reports good evidence to show that many of these programmes are successful in reducing these risks; but that is clearly a different benchmark of ‘success’ from the more general attempt to develop emotional awareness, empathy and so on which seem to be at the centre of the majority of UK efforts.

Where Emotional Intelligence programmes in the US have aimed to be genuinely educational, rather than remedial or preventative, the evidence for their effectiveness is generally weaker than in the UK, resting largely on enthusiastic anecdote and endorsement rather than on hard data. Where there is research, methodological problems are common, and include the following:

- there are rarely control groups, and if there are, they have not been randomly created
- baseline, pre-test scores are often missing
- the risk of the ‘Hawthorne effect’ – improvements due simply to the fact that something new is happening and teachers are enthusiastic about it – is high
- there is no good data on whether Emotional Intelligence education in school transfers to real-life situations out of school, nor on whether any effects that there are withstand the test of time
- Emotional Intelligence programmes vary so widely, and are often full of elements that seem to have little relevance to the development of Emotional Intelligence itself, it is almost impossible to compare one with another, nor to separate out what any ‘active ingredient’ might have been
- where one of the few well-designed studies does show positive effects, it is almost always the case that the programme is atypical – very well funded, and/or staffed by exceptionally well-qualified people – so results cannot be generalised to the majority of other programmes
- even statistically significant effects are often disappointingly small in size.

Outside the US similar problems apply. There is as yet very little evidence of the efficacy of specific aspects of Emotional Intelligence, and what there is, is not of the most rigorous quality. Katherine Weare’s chapter on ‘Profiling, assessing and evaluating emotional literacy’ in *Developing the Emotionally Literate School*, is a model of good practice. In it she suggests, as of late 2003, that: ‘If a review was done (of UK work on Emotional Intelligence) it is likely they would find some qualitative work, but very little quantitative, a smattering of before and after designs, and virtually no use of controls’. There are some studies under way, but at the moment we have plenty of enthusiastic narratives of ‘success’, but still virtually no hard data.
How emotions are learned: the importance of modelling

Much of the literature on Emotional Intelligence relates to what we might call explicit methods of teaching: specific lessons and activities that are purpose-built to focus in on the world of emotions. However, developmental studies of children’s early life at home shows that their emotional education tends to happen implicitly or indirectly, through observation, modelling, reinforcement and casual conversation. Indeed, where parents do use more formal ‘teaching’ methods, they are frequently less effective. The effectiveness of Emotional Intelligence interventions needs to be viewed against the backdrop of these implicit forms of learning.

Children’s ‘emotional apprenticeship’ takes place by watching how other people deal with their emotions. When uncertain how to respond emotionally to a new person or event, babies and toddlers take their cue from the facial expression and tone of voice of the people they trust – parents obviously, but also, very effectively, older brothers and sisters. Whether deliberately or inadvertently, family members act as powerful role models that steer the child’s emotional development. Studies of children in the Second World War showed that it was not the events they witnessed that affected their development; it was the way the adults around them reacted to those events. Being around an adult who continually ‘loses it’ is bad for a child’s own emotional development.

And how adults react to the child’s own emotions is also crucial. Mothers who respond calmly to their child’s anger or distress grow emotionally robust youngsters. Mothers who either do not respond – who deal with an emotion by ignoring it – or who respond emotionally back – perhaps reacting to their child’s inconsolable distress with panic or irritation – tend to breed children who are more aggressive, less tolerant of stress, and less sociable. As children get older, so the talk that goes on around emotional displays and events comes to play a significant role. In addition, two aspects of parenting style seem to produce emotionally intelligent children: setting clear limits within which there is freedom to play; and creating family routines that are structured, but not rigid.

Children’s emotional apprenticeship continues when they arrive at play-group or school. Whatever their conscious attitude towards Emotional Intelligence, teachers take over these modelling and reinforcing functions. Emotional Intelligence education probably depends at least as much on the way teachers publicly respond to their own shifting moods and stresses, and the way they deal with these children, as it does on set-piece discussions or activities. One can see why these more personal channels of emotional education might have been down-played, but if they are, powerful opportunities to influence the development of Emotional Intelligence are being missed. It may also be that the emotional messages conveyed through these implicit channels sometimes run counter to those that are being espoused and discussed more consciously in the classroom.
Is Emotional Intelligence good for your health?

Much emotional education involves discussing emotional matters. But is it always good to talk? That seems to depend on how you do it. In one recent study, students who were encouraged to express their feelings about being in college felt more healthy as a result – but only if their voice quality was conveying the appropriate emotional tone as they were talking. Students who talked as much about their feelings, but in a flat, unemotional way, actually became less healthy as the study went on. The researchers speculated that suppressing emotions while talking about an emotional event can actually create bodily stress that takes its toll on physical health. Teachers need to take care that conversations aimed at developing emotional literacy genuinely allow students to engage and express their emotions – not just talk about them.

On a more philosophical note, some people have grave misgivings about the view of the ‘good life’, and how to achieve it, that seems to underlie much of the Emotional Intelligence literature. Sometimes Emotional Intelligence authors write as if they believed that ‘happiness’ was simply a result of getting what you want; and that the optimal way to live is to identify an explicit set of goals that you then pursue, the achievement of which will make you ‘happy’. Goleman, for example, seems to view unmanaged emotions are potential impediments to ‘success’, and Emotional Intelligence as a way of overcoming them. As feminist writer Megan Boler notes, the ‘hero’ of Goleman’s book is not ‘emotion’ itself, but the ability to control emotion in the service of predetermined (and rather ‘masculine’-sounding) ends. Reason and deliberation are still firmly in the driving seat, it seems, and emotionality itself is acknowledged only so it can be ‘dealt with’ more effectively.

Not everyone, however, agrees that this is a vision of the ‘good life’. On the contrary, hundreds of philosophers and social theorists of the 19th, 20th and 21st centuries have seen this lifestyle as a vision not of heaven but of hell. There certainly seems little place in it for care, or serendipity, or even fun.

Michael Brearley’s Emotional Intelligence in the Classroom, for example, talks of a practical approach that ‘is based on the premise that the five emotions of success are Self-awareness, Ambition, Optimism, Empathy and Integrity’. But are these really ‘emotions’? Are they really the ones we want to single out for exclusive attention? And for what kind of ‘success’ are these really the prerequisites? Are they conspicuous characteristics of publicly ‘successful’ people? Any reader of daily newspapers would certainly be forgiven for questioning whether the most highly-paid business people, or the most senior politicians, can be recognised by their outstanding empathy and integrity.
Who in society actually profits from people’s ability to ‘manage their emotions’ more successfully? Well, the person themselves, if their temper keeps landing them in trouble and they are fed up with it. And the person themselves if it helps them obtain a good job… But what about the service industries – the call centres, burger chains, theme parks and so on – whose managers require their employees to learn how to sound emotionally just right on the phone, or to project the right degree of ‘warm and friendly’ as they hand over your large fries? Are all the training tapes new employees have to listen to, and the checklists they have to fill in, developing their Emotional Intelligence, or simply their ability to keep the customers coming? And what about that management training course that offers to teach you how to ‘dominate other people by setting the emotional tone’? Do you begin, as I do, to feel uneasy at the way Emotional Intelligence seems to be heading? And is there a risk that Emotional Intelligence ‘training’ in schools might be the first, apparently benign, step on this slippery slope?

There is a danger here of Emotional Intelligence backfiring for some troubled or troublesome young people. If the messages of Emotional Intelligence are perceived to be that (a) their emotions are their problem, (b) there are relatively straightforward things they can do to change themselves, so that (c) if they do not change, it is presumed to be their fault or their failing, this could easily make them feel worse about themselves, and possibly more angry with those around them. And what if their recalcitrance reflects not a psychological immaturity, but a principled, if poorly articulated, rejection of what school has to offer them? If we all develop our Emotional Intelligence, and we restrain our aggression and deploy our empathy, will there be anyone left to ask hard questions about what is going on around us? There are many activists who treasure the anger that fuels their commitment to a good cause.

In sum, if Emotional Intelligence is premised on a kind of liberal la-la land of pleasantness and achievement, then I’m not sure if I want it. And I don’t think William Shakespeare or William Blake, Dorothy Parker or Virginia Woolf would have wanted it either.

Is Emotional Intelligence neutral?

Statements about the nature of Emotional Intelligence often look, on the face of it, as if they are somehow ‘neutral’ or obvious. Yet the field is awash with value judgements about which emotions are ‘positive’, what kinds of social attitudes are ‘natural’, what kinds of emotional talk are ‘healthy’, and so on. Liberal western assumptions about the value of self-control, social thoughtfulness or delayed gratification are smuggled in without any explicit recognition that some of these values are contentious, in detail if not in general, and much more culture-specific than they are usually presented as being.
Take grieving as an example: In a multi-cultural context, simple-minded certainty about what the ‘right’ way to grieve is, and for how long, is fraught with dangers. In his book on Emotional Intelligence in the classroom, Mr Brearley declares with great confidence that ‘Some (so presumably not all) emotions are inevitable and healthy’, such as ‘to feel grief at a friend’s funeral’, or ‘joy as we watch our children play’. But, ‘what is not healthy, and what we can learn to control is how long and when we feel these emotions. The grief of the loss of a friend does not have to stay with us everyday and dominate our lives’. It is indicative of the risk that such statements run that Mr Brearley feels obliged, two paragraphs later, to protest that ‘Emotional Intelligence is not a sort of emotional fascism’. But that is exactly what it begins to sound like.

Emotional Intelligence tests are full of value judgements. Is it more emotionally intelligent ‘never’ to feel anxious at parties than ‘sometimes’? Isn’t it wiser to admit that you don’t know what someone else is feeling, rather than blithely assume that you do? Who is to say whether ‘always’ controlling your impulses is more emotionally healthy than sometimes giving way to them? And doesn’t it depend on a host of niceties – Which impulse? When? With a charming smile or a defiant glare? – that no simple set of questions could ever really capture? For all their faults, with a well-constructed IQ test there was little room for disagreement about the ‘right answer’. With Emotional Intelligence, you are inevitably in a moral mine-field. Nothing wrong with that – provided you don’t forget that is where you are.

Is Emotional Intelligence rich enough?

One of the puzzling things about Emotional Intelligence is just how impoverished its own emotional vocabulary seems to be. In the Emotional Intelligence literature you will not often come across detailed discussions of guilt, loneliness, disgust, lovesickness, pride or sorrow, let alone more delicate feelings like tenderness, remorse, wistfulness or sheepishness. In practise, Emotional Intelligence zooms in on a rather restricted emotional repertoire: those feelings that make you a social nuisance, and those that stop you being successful in tests or in material life. Selfishness, impulsiveness and aggression, and ways of ‘managing’ them better, loom large. If Emotional Intelligence is partly about the ability to discriminate different emotional states with greater subtlety, then it has to be said that large chunks of the Emotional Intelligence literature do not look emotionally very intelligent.
When we are being intelligent, we are able to size up situations accurately – quickly when we need to, and slowly when we have the time and things are complicated – and respond in a way that optimises all the things we want and preserves all the things we care about. From a biological point of view, being good at IQ tests comes a long way down the list of priorities. When you look at the worlds of nature and evolution, say the behavioural scientists, it is obvious that we, like other animals, have emotions in order to help us be smart (in the way I have just outlined it). Emotions are a core part of our intelligence. They are not a collection of gratuitous nuisances and distractions that stop us being bright; they are the foundations on which our ability to be intelligent is built. Each of our basic emotions corresponds to a particular way of being bright, in the face of an evolutionarily familiar kind of significant situation.

If you look at Table 1 you will see what I mean. Each row corresponds to one of the ‘significance modes’ that evolution has equipped us with. Across each row run the different aspects of that mode: what kind of archetypal event triggers it; how it feels; how it alters the ‘default settings’ of body and mind; how you tend to react behaviourally; the effect that it has on others around you; what successful resolution feels like; and I’ve also illustrated one of the ways in which the mode can go wrong. Take the first line, the ‘distress mode’. This is perhaps our most basic response to any kind of emergency. It is the one that is up and running from the moment we are born. Adrenalin floods the system, and it sends out a loud SOS to anyone of the same species who happens to be in earshot that says ‘Help! Rescue me!’ Often physical contact from a known other is sufficient to signal that the emergency is over. When this system becomes hyperactive or dysfunctional beyond childhood, we might describe someone as very ‘needy’ or ‘dependent’, or even ‘hysterical’.

At root, intelligence is whatever it is that enables us to live well. To live in harmony with our neighbours; to take care of our ‘living room’; to pursue our interests and satisfy our needs; to meet threats and challenges successfully, and to learn how to meet them with increasing skill, subtlety and flexibility: these are the kinds of things that our ‘intelligence’ is designed to cope with.

Table 1: Some of the basic emotional systems

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Trigger</th>
<th>Feeling</th>
<th>Reaction</th>
<th>Signal</th>
<th>Resolution</th>
<th>Pathology</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alarm</td>
<td>Distress</td>
<td>Wriggle/cry</td>
<td>‘Help!’</td>
<td>Comfort</td>
<td>Hysteria</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Threat (escapable)</td>
<td>Fear</td>
<td>Flight/focus</td>
<td>‘Look there!’</td>
<td>Safety</td>
<td>Phobia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Threat to resource</td>
<td>Anger</td>
<td>Fight/intimidate</td>
<td>‘Back off!’</td>
<td>Triumph</td>
<td>Chronic aggression</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Irretrievable loss</td>
<td>Sadness</td>
<td>Withdraw/mope</td>
<td>‘Leave me alone’</td>
<td>Acceptance</td>
<td>Depression</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Depletion</td>
<td>Tiredness</td>
<td>Rest</td>
<td>‘Do not disturb!’</td>
<td>Energy</td>
<td>Exhaustion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Toxicity</td>
<td>Disgust</td>
<td>Close senses/expel</td>
<td>‘Avoid this!’</td>
<td>Relief</td>
<td>Compulsion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Novelty</td>
<td>Interest</td>
<td>Investigate/learn</td>
<td>‘Look at this!’</td>
<td>Mastery/power</td>
<td>Recklessness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disruption</td>
<td>Anxiety</td>
<td>Startle/vigilance</td>
<td>‘Trouble!’</td>
<td>Clarity/purpose</td>
<td>Anxiety disorder</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resource</td>
<td>Desire</td>
<td>Appropriate/consume</td>
<td>‘That’s mine!’</td>
<td>Satiation</td>
<td>Obsession</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Or take the anger system, which is triggered by a threat to self or treasured other person, object or territory which you cannot run away from or abandon. The body pumps up for action, the face and posture signal strength, determination and aggression, and your attention is primed to look for points of weakness and advantage in your opponent. The social signal says ‘Oh no you don’t!’. The resolution feels like ‘triumph’ (assuming you win). And the *reductio ad absurdum* might be road rage, domestic violence or chronic hypertension.

Let me draw your attention to the Learning Mode and Anxiety Mode. In Learning Mode, the trigger is something unusual that doesn’t look too dangerous, and which it might be useful to get to know. The feeling is ‘interest’ and the action is approach, investigate and try to find out how it works. The social signal is often ‘Hey, look at this!’ (unless you don’t want to share your ‘new toy’ just yet), and the resolution is the feeling of power or success that comes with understanding and mastery. The pathology could be obsessional interest or reckless sensation-seeking.

In Anxiety Mode, what you have been doing has been interrupted, but you don’t yet know what kind of interruption it is. You have not yet made your preliminary diagnosis. Here the feeling is of surprise, and if it goes on too long, the kind of anxiety that accompanies not knowing what to do. The response is to stop everything and attend very carefully. The social signal is a quiet version of ‘Watch out!’, and the resolution is clarity about what to do and the release of your pent-up energy. Too much of this mode and you might be suffering from what clinical psychologists call ‘Generalised Anxiety Disorder’.

So what does it take to be emotionally intelligent?

Intelligence depends on choosing the right mode for the moment. Stupidity is trying to investigate something that is about to eat you, dithering as your object of desire slips away, or getting angry with the one you love. Sometimes the situation is ambiguous, and we just make the wrong bet. And sometimes we misread it, engage the wrong emotional mode, and make matters worse. Everyone is familiar with that kind of ‘emotional stupidity’ – especially when they are tired or stressed.

These preliminary diagnoses are not once-and-for-all decisions. As the situation changes and reveals more of itself, so it is good to be able to reappraise and shift modes. And as you do so, what was interesting becomes scary, what was sad now makes you angry, and your lethargy gives way to desire. Another form of emotional stupidity is being inflexible – staying angry long after your misunderstanding has been revealed, and so on. It is the fundamental job of the brain to keep weighing up the options and deciding whether to stick or shift. And it does so, much of the time, without troubling reasoning, or even conscious awareness, with the intricacies of the decision-making process.

I hope it is now a bit clearer what I meant when I said our ‘emotions’ are in reality the vital foundations of our intelligence. They comprise the biological start-up software with which we start out. Emotional intelligence, on this view, is a matter of how well this repertoire of options achieves its intended purpose of keeping us well, safe, accepted and amused. Learning can fine-tune this software to the particular family and culture, with their idiosyncratic sets of threats and opportunities, you find yourself born into. Experience can help us get immeasurably brighter.
Where does happiness fit in?

What about the positive emotions? Where is happiness? If you look down the column called ‘Resolution’, you will find nine varieties of ‘happiness’. These states of resolution are positive precisely so we will be motivated to take the ‘negative emotions’ seriously. The reward they hold out encourages us to do the ‘work’ that the fear or sadness or learning is telling us is necessary. ‘Hide and seek’ is an enjoyable game only because we know we will be rescued, hugged and welcomed back.

Barbara Fredrickson at the University of Michigan has illustrated this positive effect of the positive emotions in an elegant series of experiments. She has shown that there is a strong relationship between some of the positive emotions and the process of learning itself. We don’t just feel pleased when we have learned something; pleasant feelings like fascination, amusement and absorption are often associated with being in Learning Mode. The so-called ‘negative emotions’ like fear, anger and sadness, when they are strong, tend to fixate us on the threatening object, and how to deal with it, while the positive emotions are associated with a broader span of attention; a wider range of possibilities for thought and action; and a more curious and creative attitude. As Frederickson says: ‘positive emotions broaden people's modes of thinking and action, which, over time, builds their enduring personal and social resources.’ And she also has evidence that positive emotions are contagious – they are characteristic of learning communities as well as learning individuals.

However, we should remember Joseph Forgas’s research that we mentioned earlier, and not get too starry-eyed. Forgas reinforced Fredrickson’s association between positive mood and creativity. But you will recall that he also showed that being mildly irritable or out-of-sorts actually makes you a more critical and more accurate learner.

The role of learning in intelligence

Learning has an interesting place in this approach to ‘Emotional Intelligence’. It is both the means whereby intelligence changes, and one of the forms of intelligence itself. It helps us get wiser about when and how we get angry. And it can also turn round on itself, and help us get sharper about learning. That is why ‘learning to learn’ is such an important responsibility of education, and why it often gets linked, in schools, with Emotional Intelligence.

But this scheme reminds us that ‘learning’ is only one bright mode amongst many. All other things being equal, it pays, in survival terms, to opt for investigation, and promise of mastery, rather than avoidance or attack. Mastery leaves you with more options. You can do something different next time, because you know more. Avoidance leaves you always at the mercy of the frightening thing, because you never find out how to neutralise it – or even discover that it might have been safe all along.

One of the things parents (and teachers) do is create an environment in which it is safe to learn. They indicate, either by a gate across the stairs, a quick frown, or a stern-sounding ‘No!’ , what is not safe, and children internalise these signals so that they learn how to make those discriminations more accurately for themselves. (Too lax or too prescriptive, and you stop those vital discriminations being learned.)
What are the classroom implications of the scientists’ view of Emotional Intelligence? Every moment of every lesson, every young person’s brain is weighing up the pros and cons of the different options on the emotional menu (and so is the teacher’s). This does not mean, however, that teachers are somehow debarred from interfering with ‘nature’. We try to influence each others’ brains all the time. But it does mean that, whatever a young person is doing, it necessarily reflects their brain’s best attempt to weigh up the odds and choose the best option. You might think what they are doing is dumb or self-defeating – but that is only because your brain does not see the world the way their brain sees it. This view invites us to be patient, and to try to understand our students more, so we can help them see more clearly when and what it is safe – and in their real interests – to learn.

Emotional stupidity

Anyone can become angry – that is easy. But to be angry with the right person, to the right degree, at the right time, for the right purpose, and in the right way – that is not easy.

Aristotle.

Of course, this outline is only the beginning of the story of true Emotional Intelligence. The rest concerns all the ways in which this nice, neat and simple picture becomes more complicated, and goes wrong. Learning can and does make us less intelligent, as well as more. Throughout childhood and adolescence we are learning new things to desire (the right trainers) and new things to treat as threatening (turning up to school in the wrong trainers). We develop a self-image and a super-ego that we try to live up to (thus creating the new emotions of shame and guilt). We learn what feelings are appropriate to show when, with what kind of display and intensity, and for how long. We are learning to mix up the primary colours of emotion, and to overlay anger with sadness, or guilt with disgust. We may learn that it is uncool to show fear, or cool to laugh at things that actually disgust us. We learn what emotions it is too dangerous to excite in those on whom we depend. We may acquire such a rich, conflicting agenda of things to care about that our brain sometimes just jams up and we freeze. And we learn back-up strategies for covering up such glitches.
All this sophistication opens up enormous scope for emotional stupidity. We assign the wrong weights to some of our learned threats and desires, so that we choose the wrong mode. We run when it would be better to learn; fight when it would be better to ask for help. A realistic picture of Emotional Intelligence reveals many more ways of being emotionally stupid than just a lack of ‘impulse control’ or an ‘amygdala highjack’. Perhaps the most monumentally stupid of all forms of emotional stupidity is to stigmatise our own emotions, see them as at odds with ‘reason’, and disconnect them from our decision-making processes. Emotions may sometimes be misleading; but to respond by trying to bleach our thoughts of their emotional colours is not bright at all.

Again, it’s not that there is a special kind of intelligence called ‘Emotional Intelligence’. Emotion is a vital facet of intelligence. Emotion is intelligence. It’s not that, as the Emotional Literacy Handbook says, ‘emotions provide us with the information we need to rapidly evaluate situations… and make decisions about how to respond’31. The emotional mode we are in is the result of that rapid evaluation. Being emotionally intelligent means making that initial diagnosis as well as we can; and then being continually ready to reappraise it in the light of both unfolding events, and of deeper considerations that may take a little longer to bubble to the surface of our minds.

A note on ‘neurobabble’

While we are on the subject of the brain, we should note the extent to which pseudo-neuroscience is commonly used to give familiar, and often contentious, ideas about Emotional Intelligence a fresh lick of impressive-looking paint. ‘Facts’ about the brain are often trotted out as if they (a) represent the latest and the most incontrovertible of scientific truths, and (b) directly generate strong implications about how to teach. Usually, neither is true. Let’s look at a couple of examples.

The first is the idea that the brain can be divided into three, increasingly primitive layers, and that we can shift up and down between these layers of operation, like changing gears in a car. This theory of the so-called ‘triune brain’ was developed during the 1950s and 1960s by American neurologist Paul MacLean, and first published in full in 1970. MacLean argued that natural selection had added new layers to the evolving brain that left the earlier layers unchanged. We had, in effect, ‘a hierarchy of three-brains-in-one’, he said. The lowest layer, the brain stem, was essentially reptilian. The middle layer was the emotional mammalian brain, underwritten by what he called the ‘limbic system’. And the highest, the neocortical brain, subserved the specifically human intellectual functions of thinking, decision-making, language and so on. The model is widely used to lend authority to the idea that negative emotions prevent learning, because they cause us to ‘down-shift’ through the layers of the brain, from the ‘learning’ level, the neocortex, to the ‘basic survival’ level of the primitive, reflex reptilian hind-brain.

This neat picture, now past its 50th birthday, is not the ‘latest word’ on the brain, nor is it true. It began to crumble almost as soon as it was published, and now is known to be wrong in every respect. The ‘limbic system’ does not exist. There is no emotional layer in the brain separate from thinking
on the one hand and control of the visceral functions on the other. The ‘vertical’ connections between these putative layers are so many, and so complex, that functionally they are not different layers at all. Oxford neuroscientist Edmund Rolls speaks of a single fear system that comprised both the amygdala and areas of the frontal cortex, for example.

And the neural systems that underwrite different emotions are, as I have already suggested, quite different, and cannot be boiled down to a single ‘centre’. There is even good evidence that emotions as apparently similar as fear and anxiety are subserved by quite different neural systems, as I have suggested in Table 1. And it is just not true that the ‘lower’ centres have been unaffected by the subsequent evolution of the ‘higher’. We no more have an unreconstructed ‘reptilian brain’ inside our heads than a modern lizard has a ‘dinosaur brain’. When you are scared you do not turn into a snake; nor do you stop learning. As we have seen, it is true that certain kinds of ‘stress’ interfere with certain kinds of learning. It does not take a Nobel Laureate to deduce that a boy’s maths might suffer for a while if his Nan has just died. But it is not true that all ‘stress’ closes down all ‘learning’.

The second example of neurobabble is the idea that you can neatly split the brain vertically (rather than, as the triune brain does, ‘horizontally’) into two hemispheres that have different functions. The left hemisphere, we are often told, is logical, while the right hemisphere is the emotional one. Yoking them together is a big bundle of nerve fibres called the corpus callosum. Your students will be able to think better, so the oft-repeated idea goes, if we expand the capacity of this connecting link and bring the two sides of our brains into closer and more efficient communication.

We can do this by the simple expedient of getting students to take part in games that involve, for example, rapidly touching each ear to the opposite knee for five minutes a day.

There is no evidence that these kinds of exercises, practised for a few minutes a day, actually stimulate any neural development; nor that they have any effect on the brain’s ability to learn. As Professor Howard Gardner says of this popular image, bending over backwards to be charitable:

*I do not impugn their motives – though I do question the judgment of the brain’s great dichotomisers. Many, for example, sincerely detect faults in our society, especially in its educational system, and are eager to use any method at their disposal to bring about desired changes. But the scientific enterprise is too precious to be sacrificed to any cause, however worthy it may appear. It is time for investigators conversant with brain lateralization to announce that the unknowns in the field dwarf the little that is known, and the little more that is suspected*. (emphasis added)
The upsurge of interest in Emotional Intelligence is a welcome corrective to the school curriculum which has been too focused, traditionally, on the desiccated certainties of text-book academia and, latterly, on ‘competencies’ driven, in part, by narrow technical and economic imperatives. Developing skills and pleasure in the rich world of the emotions is vital to the well-being of both individuals and their communities. Emotionally stupid people can do genuinely stupid (cruel, destructive) things.

It is precisely because Emotional Intelligence is so important that it should not be allowed to be reduced to a bolt-on, sound-bite, commercially-driven business opportunity – by anyone, from DfES officials extolling the virtues of the latest ‘strategy’, to the writers of the glossy brochures that land on headteachers’ desks in their dozens. There are thoughtful, creative and well-informed writings and materials around. I suggest you trust your nose and seek them out. I have listed some of the ones I think are worth exploring on page 33. And I suggest you cast a very jaundiced eye over much of the rest of the Emotional Intelligence product industry.

Meanwhile, I have distilled some of the points made in the foregoing discussion into some recommendations. You may not agree with them all, and that is fine. But I hope they will be of some assistance to your teaching.

Advice to a teacher

- Remember: being ‘emotionally intelligent’ is completely different from having a sunny disposition. Emotional Intelligence, if it is worth anything, does not point towards a bland, feel-good world of pleasantness and success. It helps young people get ready to cope well with the full rainbow of emotions that inevitable accompany the vicissitudes of life. Furthering Emotional Intelligence is an honourable ambition for any teacher or school, but a hard one to fulfil.

- And being emotionally literate – able to talk fluently about emotions – is very different from being emotionally sensitive and adept in one’s spontaneous life. The former by no means guarantees the latter. Helping young people develop their emotional vocabulary is a worthwhile thing to do – but it may not contribute a great deal to their all-round Emotional Intelligence.

- By all means offer opportunities for young people to explore their feelings, but always allow them to decline. They have just as much right to their privacy as you do. Many cultures do not see it as a good thing for a person to disclose their inner life, especially to people they do not know extremely well. And remember the research that shows that talking about emotions in a soulless way can do young people more harm than good.
• How you deal with your own emotions in front of a class, and how open you are about your emotional ups and downs, probably have greater impact (for good or ill) on students’ development than set-piece discussions and activities. A teacher who announces cheerfully ‘I’m in a bad mood today, so you’d better watch out…’, and models a kind of semi-playful grumpiness, may be being a better Emotional Intelligence educator than one who insists on an earnest discussion, packed with unacknowledged moralising messages, about an earlier playground dispute.

• As far as possible, respond to young people’s emotions in a way that acknowledges them without being emotionally reactive. And remember that everyone has their limits of tolerance, even you.

• When anyone in a sharp suit is inviting you to accept some simple slogan about ‘feel good, learn good’ or ‘foster self-esteem’, remember how much more rich, interesting and complicated your own emotional life is than any slogan. Don’t lose your critical common sense.

• Do not lightly assume you understand young people’s emotions or problems. They are infinitely more complicated than you think (just like you are). Show some humility and learn always to check any assumptions or interpretations you might be making about why they are as they are.

• Young people’s feelings and moods are triggered by their perception of events – the interpretations and values that their brains create. That’s what you have to work with. It may well not work simply to try to persuade them they’re wrong. There’s a cartoon that says ‘Be reasonable – see it my way’. It’s funny (a) because we all fall into the trap of assuming that our way is the ‘reasonable’ way, and (b) because we know you can’t just change someone’s mind like that.

• Changing emotional habits is possible, and it is somewhere between quite challenging and very hard, depending on how deep-rooted the habit is; remember the people struggling for months or years in counselling or psychotherapy. Remember how hard it might have been to give up smoking or lose weight. Do not fall for the idea that a well-designed worksheet and a quick discussion will achieve very much. It may be a start, but no more than that.

• Anyone who isn’t an academic neuroscientist probably does not know what they are talking about, when it comes to the brain. Do not let them get away with slick phrases like ‘reptilian brain’ or ‘amygdala highjack’. Ask them hard questions. Ask them how many litres of water a day they drink.

• Where possible, do your Emotional Intelligence education through the rich resources of the arts and humanities – and even in science or maths, through a continual acknowledgement of the role of emotion in people’s lives, careers and stories.

• It may be worth trying to surface some of the common beliefs that young people may have at the backs of their minds that link learning, emotions and ‘self-esteem’ in counter-productive ways. For example:

  • success means you are ‘bright’ (so failure means you are stupid, so don’t attempt what you might fail at – in other words, don’t take risks)
  • speed of learning is an index of how ‘bright’ you are (so slow means stupid)
  • ‘bright’ people find learning easy (so if you have to try, you must be stupid)
  • if you can’t get it fast, you won’t get it at all (so there is no point trying)
  • learning is uncool (so you risk being shamed or rejected if you look too ‘keen’).
AND FINALLY...

Is it OK to talk sloppily about ‘Emotional Intelligence’ if it’s in a good cause?

Is intellectual precision about Emotional Intelligence a luxury we can do without? Do the good intentions obviate the need for clear thinking and critical reflection? Does it matter that *particular* emotions are not specified when sweeping claims are being made? Does it matter that ‘ambition’ and ‘integrity’, though they are aspects of some definitions of Emotional Intelligence, do not appear on any academic’s list of *emotions*, and that the world at large treats them as *attitudes* or *values* instead?

Does it matter that collections of enthusiastically applied, but empirically untested tips for improving learning or calming the emotions are reverently treated as if they were established, well-constructed, theoretically coherent ‘bodies of knowledge’? Does it matter that a book called *Emotional Intelligence in the Classroom* contains large sections about goal-setting, learning styles, and memory techniques that seem to have nothing to do with emotion? Is one entitled to feel short-changed when *The Emotional Literacy Handbook* declares that ‘People often ask what works in promoting emotional literacy. The answer we give is that everything works and nothing works’? I do think one is so entitled. And, yes, the sloppy thinking does matter. It undermines our respect for forms of knowledge that are rigorous, trustworthy and hard-won. It does young people a disservice if, under the banner of education, we serve to peddle them half-truths. And it deals them a much bigger insult if the Emotional Intelligence road leads, even for a few of them, to the intense training in emotional impression management that they have to endure before they are deemed fit to sell people a burger or welcome them to a theme park.

It seems as if people sometimes forget their own lived experience when they step into the world of Emotional Intelligence. All the puzzling minutiae of our emotional lives — of anxious phone calls, frosty silences, sudden smiles, stabs of envy and pangs of guilt — can get bleached out in the bright light of cheerful nostrums and confident advice. ‘How simple life would be, if it was as simple as we think,’ said the novelist Michael Dibdin. And nowhere does that wry comment apply more strongly than to the business of ‘emotional education’. Let us be optimistic, by all means. But let us not deceive young people, or their teachers either, about the slipperiness and inscrutability — the marvellous mystery — of their emotional lives.
Where can I find out more?

**Practical steps**
The best source of information about practical approaches to Emotional Intelligence is the Department for Education and Skills/Department of Health booklet *Promoting Emotional Health and Well-Being*, available from The Health Development Agency, [www.wiredforhealth.gov.uk](http://www.wiredforhealth.gov.uk)

I also recommend


**Weighty tomes on Emotional Intelligence**
These two books give an up-to-date picture of the research on Emotional Intelligence. The first, especially, goes into the theory, the practical programmes and the empirical research in great detail.


**Theories of emotion**
On modern theories of the psychology of emotion I recommend


**Emotion and the brain**


**Children’s emotions, education and learning**
Finally, here are some classic books that you might like to (re)read, that give a genuinely rich feel for the emotional lives of children, and how to respond to them without getting too ‘managerial’.


Notes

1 I am extremely grateful to Sheila Dainton, Nansi Ellis and Guy Goodwin at ATL for their detailed comments on an earlier draft of this paper, and to Erica McWilliam for helpful and hilarious conversations on Emotional Intelligence.

2 See for example the joint Department of Health/Department for Education and Skills publication Promoting Emotional Health and Well-Being through the National Healthy School Standard, 2004, Health Development Agency. In this document, the phrases ‘emotional health and well-being’, ‘Emotional Intelligence’ and ‘emotional literacy’ are given the same meaning.

3 See note 1.


14 Ciarrocchi et al, op. cit., p.54.


17 Weare, ibid., p.128.

18 For stories of success, see The Antidote Emotional Literacy Handbook, op. cit.

19 For more details on research issues, see Chapter 11 of Matthews et al.

20 Weare, op. cit., p.150.


26 Daniel Goleman, Emotional Intelligence, Bantam, 1995, p.117.

27 Brearley, op. cit., p.47.

28 Saturated again, of course, with value judgements!


31 Antidote, op. cit., p.12.


34 For instance, Professor Barbara McCombs from Denver has shown that one of the most powerful influences on students’ achievement is students’ perception of the extent to which their teachers understand learning and learners, and have their learners’ interests at heart. It is that perception that makes the difference; not what teachers think they are doing, intend to do, or even what they actually are doing. See Barbara McCombs and Jo Sue Whisler, The Learner-Centred Classroom and School, Jossey-Bass: San Francisco, 1997.

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