

Does Your School Support Deep, Long-Lasting Learning? Part 1: Emotions and Social Connections

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What comes to mind when you hear the word "audit"? Taxes? Accounting? Compliance? What about school design? No? Well, for those working in and running schools, auditing can also be a useful way to learn more about the environment you've designed and unearth ways to improve deeper learning. The process can be used in many flexible ways. You just need a deep understanding of your school and a set of criteria you want to analyze your school against. In working with design teams, I've seen the auditing process work especially well as a way to address a truly daunting task: *aligning school designs to research on how deep, long-lasting learning happens*.

Why is this such a daunting task? It's actually not hard to understand. The pace of education research in recent times is staggering. Yet this research is often long and complex, and working in or running a school does not leave much time for processing and applying all that's being discovered. As we explored [previously in this blog](#), the result is that many of our students are still sitting in schools that look and operate like those of a century ago. These schools were designed for a different era—when the purpose of education was to prepare an elite few for professional careers and everyone else for industrial and local work. However, our society has changed drastically, and we now know a great deal more about how to help schools do the same.

In this two-part blog series, I'll dig deeper into research related to two hot topics—the role of emotions and social connections in deep learning and the potential of flexible, student-driven learning—in order to set leaders up to learn about and improve their own schools. I'll start by summarizing some key points from the research. Then I'll offer a set of criteria that can be used to audit a school design. Finally, I'll highlight some of the common pitfalls that may occur. It bears noting that this is not the first time the research on these topics has been summarized, far from it. However, my hope is that shedding light on the key implications for schools and the typical design pitfalls will help schools more easily audit their environment and make decisions that support deep, long-lasting learning.

What does the research say about emotions and social connections?

First, research demonstrates that emotions interact with cognition in complex ways to support or hinder learning. Emotions ranging from glee to rage can be constructive for learning because they instill a sense that the content and experiences are valuable and increase students' motivation. On the other hand, research demonstrates that unconstructive emotions—like anxiety, fear, and depression—can also monopolize a learner's attention and overwhelm working memory. This inhibits new learning and can cause a learner to disengage from the learning community, especially when the emotions occupying his or her mind are not acknowledged and responded to by those around the learner. Another relevant finding from research related to emotions and learning is that strong emotions—both positive and negative ones—can create cues that strengthen the likelihood of remembering specific events, thoughts, and feelings at a later point in time. These vivid, long-lasting memories are sometimes referred to as "flashbulb" memories. The creation of these types of powerful memories can help lock in learning. However, learners also bring prior life experiences with them to school each day, and in some cases, these experiences may be negative, traumatic ones that impair learning when triggered.

And what about social connections? How do they influence deeper learning? In many ways, social connections work hand in hand with emotions. For example, researchers have found that both having a general sense that one belongs within the school community and having deep, meaningful relationships with individual peers and teachers can foster constructive emotions and can buffer against anxiety, stress, and trauma. Research also demonstrates that learning through collaborative and social interaction can make the process feel more valuable to learners and in turn increase motivation. This type of learning also provides a context wherein students can actively grapple with ideas by explaining their thinking and listening to the ideas of others. This process of active, generative learning supports successful encoding, provides a

different way to practice and get feedback, and even helps learners think about their own thinking. All of this helps make learning deeper and more long-lasting.

How might a school work to honor the research?

This research suggests that schools need to actively attend to the social and emotional elements of learning and development if they want to achieve deep, long-lasting learning. Now comes the hard part—applying this research to our schools. In order to help you, the table below outlines some of the implications of this research for schools. Specifically, it includes a set of six criteria that can be used when auditing the design and implementation of a school. It also lists some specific examples of design choices that would honor the criteria, along with some common design pitfalls.

Auditing Criteria

Aligned Design Choices

Common Design Pitfalls

Social and emotional competencies are explicit learning goals

- Incorporate social and emotional competencies into learning objective and curriculum
 - Provide explicit instruction, opportunities for practice, and high-quality feedback to learners on their progress
- Only prioritizing core-academic knowledge and skills
 - Making social and emotional competencies goals, but relying extensively on direct instruction and not providing opportunities for practice and feedback
 - Not assessing progress toward development of social and emotional competencies

Constructive emotions are actively fostered

- Ensure teachers have the knowledge, skills, and mindsets needed to plan distinctive, curiosity-provoking, or emotionally compelling learning experiences
 - Enable children to select topics of interest and of deep value or create content that matches
- Focusing solely on fostering happiness, especially through games and play, and not considering the motivational power of emotions like wonder, surprise, and outrage
 - Adults not modeling constructive emotions to learners

interests and what is
valuable

Unconstructive emotions such as excessive stress and anxiety are buffered against

- Build time into each day for learners to reflect on their emotional state and use tools and practices to diffuse negative emotions
- Provide learners with instruction on emotional-regulation strategies like journaling and mindful breathing
- Provide emotional-support services to learners through school counselors or outside partners
- Waiting for students to express and seek help for their stress or anxiety on their own
- Only providing *some* learners with an opportunity to diffuse negative emotions and distractors through pullout counseling or other isolating activities

All learners feel an authentic sense of belonging in the school community

- Incorporate community-building practices like restorative circles
- Incorporate stories of challenge and triumph into community-building times and the curriculum, especially stories that highlight individuals from traditionally oppressed groups
- Survey students to learn about the levels of belonging they feel
- Use of language that highlights ways a student does not fit into the community
- Zero-tolerance discipline policies that isolate students

All learners have authentic, deep relationships with a trusted adult and peers

- Develop mentoring relationships between peers
- Using every moment for instructional time at the

- Provide teachers with discourse protocols for getting to know learners
- Incorporate time into the schedule for 1:1 or small-group interactions between adults and students
- expense of relationship building
- Not explicitly coaching teachers in how to build positive relationships with students, especially across lines of difference
- Knowledge of learners held by mentors not being shared with other adults in the school community

Learners routinely have opportunities to grapple with learning together

- Use pedagogical approaches that incorporate extensive collaboration
- Explicitly teach collaboration techniques
- Provide protocols for discussion such as sentence stems for agreeing and disagreeing or for giving feedback
- Assuming students already have the knowledge, skills, and mindsets needed to collaborate effectively
- Framing moments of collaboration as fun breaks, instead of great learning opportunities

Read more about the specific research underpinning this post in Transcend's Designing for Learning resources, accessible [here](#).