



## THINK TANK: Teacher to Student

Written by: Skye Playsted (with Curtis Kelly)

# For the Love of Teaching (and love of your students)

When did you fall in love...with teaching?

“No one should teach who is not in love with teaching” wrote the American poet [Margaret E. Sangster](#) in 1909. For some of us, teaching was a love affair that began in our youth; for others, it was a relationship that bloomed later in life. I [Skye] fell in love with teaching in the final year of my Arts degree. Not knowing what to do with my degree or my future, I decided I’d finish study as quickly as I could and find a job in a café somewhere to pay the bills. I took a single semester course called “The Four Macroskills of Teaching German,” as I’d enjoyed studying German as a second language, and it meant I could finish my degree within the semester rather than drag it out till the end of the year. I am forever indebted to the passionate educator who ran that course. She prompted us to ask ourselves questions about language learning concepts: how we felt when we were learning a new language, what

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we remembered as being difficult when we were learning something initially. I’d never asked myself questions about *how* I learned a second language, so by taking this short course, I learned how to reflect on and explore the language learning process. My eyes were suddenly opened to the joy of being able to understand and help someone else on their language

learning journey. That was the start of my falling in love with teaching!

A postgraduate teaching diploma followed, and then I set off with my new-found passion, ready to change the world one classroom at a time! It is now years later, and my passion for teaching a second language hasn't faded (I now teach English as an Additional Language), but it has been enriched by lessons from educational neuroscience and psychology. Some of the most important lessons have been about students' emotional, social, and cognitive needs. These are areas that you may have viewed as secondary to language teaching, but I hope this article encourages you to take a fresh look at your classroom approach and consider what these insights from educational neuroscience have to offer you in your own teaching context.

## Lighting the flame: Teaching with the science of emotion



Teaching is about relationships, and relationships involve emotions. Not all relationships are easy to develop, though, as I discovered in the first school I taught in. This school was a “tough” school: many of the children there needed extra support as they faced difficulties in their lives at home and displayed challenging behaviours at school. I remember walking round the buildings on my first visit and thinking “Oh my! They actually *are* swinging from the rafters!” Noisy, unruly children were everywhere—yelling and using the iron beams that supported the old, two-storey classroom buildings as makeshift play equipment. Coming from a teaching practicum at an exclusive private school with state-of-the-art equipment and well-behaved students, I experienced some culture shock as I started to teach in this low

socioeconomic district. I struggled to get these kids to sit at a desk for more than 30 seconds at a time, let alone teach them a new language! But it was here that I began to learn about the power of tapping into students' emotions to ignite their interest and hold their attention so that learning could happen.

Emotions influence our decisions and our actions in everyday life and, of course, this is also true in the classroom. This is especially true for positive emotions, such as feeling that the learning content is meaningful or valuable or interesting, but it can be true negative emotions, too, such as empathic sadness. Emotions like embarrassment fear or anger, however, are more likely to turn the learning away from language and towards the stressor, just the opposite of what we want. We can harness the power of our students' emotions to promote learning, because emotional stimuli activate circuits in the brain that in turn affect how well we learn. For example, once our emotions are aroused, stress hormones such as adrenaline and cortisol are activated, and these enhance the brain's working memory and long-term memory processes ([LeDoux, 2000](#)). Our brains prioritise memories or information as more important when they are "tagged" with emotions as meaningful, and we will then *want* to learn more about this information ([Cavanagh, 2016](#)).



As a first-year language teacher, I learned that over 50% of the children in my school spoke languages in addition to English at home. Rather than focus only on the language I was teaching them (German), I asked students about their home languages. This fostered positive connections with language learning, and it also helped students to develop an interest in my lessons. They were able to make

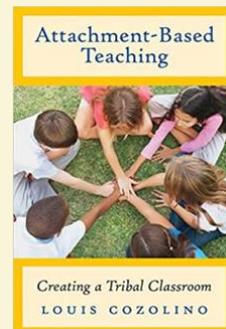
connections between their home languages and cultures, and the new language and culture of German that I was introducing them to.

## Nurturing the relationship: Meeting students' social needs through attachment-based teaching

When we understand, value, and prioritise our students' emotional needs, this contributes positively to their ability to learn. One way we do this is through taking time to build and nurture positive relationships with students. In my beginning teaching days, I was given a classroom to teach in that had an old, iron-frame piano. Since I could play a few chords, I made up simple songs in German for class, and I found that the piano was a drawcard for kids during their lunch hour. They would come in and eat their lunch and sing songs, and this became one of the ways I could build relationships with my students. Spending time talking with kids in the playground or in other out-of-class contexts can build trust and relationships, and this can positively influence classroom behaviour as students begin to see their teacher as someone who is interested in them as a person.

At the start of this article, I also talked about the need to love our students. Love as a way to enhance education? That is not as odd as it seems.

Psychologist Louis Cozolino writes about the [Tribal Classroom](#), where he posits that our educational system, in its moves towards assembly-line standardization, has moved further and further away from the way evolution shaped us to learn. To paraphrase his comments in a [Reach Teach Talk interview \(2020\)](#):



You can't look at the situation of education from the present day. We have look at the evolutionary context that shaped our brains. We lived in tribes of 75-100 people for over hundreds and thousands of years, and during that time our brains, our bodies, our minds, were shaped into social organs. Evolution enhanced our own survival, but also, the survival of the group.

Think about how we learned and who we learned from for hundreds of thousands of years: We learned from people we were related to, who loved us and we loved, and whose survival we depended on and whose own survival as they grew old depended on the student. So, there was this ongoing flow of energy, information, and biological life force.

When I think about education now, institutional education, which is kind of, from my perspective, an oxymoron because we did not evolve to learn in institutions. Similar materials, similar output, none of those things work when it comes to people. It works less and less depending on the resources, security, and well-being

of the people in the system. So, the system works well for privileged people, but not all the time even for them, and less so for people with less vested interest in the system and fewer resources at home.

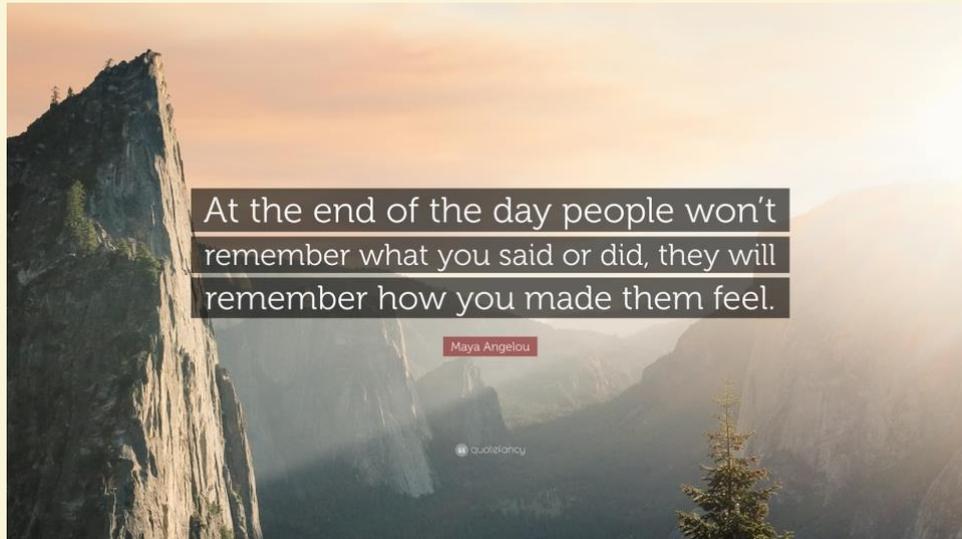


## Making relationships a priority: Your students will remember how you made them *feel*

As we can see, forming rich relationships with learners, and even love, is not an extra. It is at the core of all learning. Great teachers may not have the highest qualifications, a perfectly organized classroom, or keep their planning up to date. But they will be teachers who create classrooms of trust and love. Students who feel appreciated, safe, and valued as class members will learn better. Cozolino sums this up in a sentence about his eighth-grade math teacher who made such an impact on him: “He was a great teacher who loved math and loved me, and I loved him back” (Cozolino, 2014, p. 242). It is that simple.

What I first considered a love of “teaching” was not just about pedagogy or linguistics, it was equally about a love for my students and the relationships that I developed with them. I may not have always been the most qualified person for the teaching jobs I’ve taken on over the years, and sometimes I haven’t followed

institutional expectations or rules as well as I could have. But what I have learned is that the care and emotions I express in my classroom make a positive difference to students' learning and wellbeing. We don't need to feel embarrassed about showing our emotions; it's OK to let our students know how much we love them, and how much we love teaching them. Inside the classroom or in everyday life, prioritising relationships will always be the right decision to make.



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