

Chapter 65

The Homeostatic Classroom: A New Framework for Creating an Optimal Learning Environment

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ABSTRACT

This chapter will propose a new theoretical and practical framework that can be utilized in any type of classroom, including multicultural classrooms, and that creates an optimal learning environment while also being highly protective against potentially traumatic experiences for both students and teachers. The chapter will also introduce the “choose love” tool, which can be used in any classroom to connect the students and the teacher to the “homeostatic drive” – a global force or drive within each of us that is biologically and evolutionarily designed to keep us in states of homeostasis, or equilibrium, at all levels, and that is, the chapter will argue, the force of all love and self-love, including all “love” of learning.

INTRODUCTION

The classroom is both an opportunity for deep, enriching, connecting experiences, and also an environment filled with risks for potentially traumatic, disconnecting experiences that can be highly detrimental to students, teachers, and to the classroom environment as a whole. In multicultural classrooms, where differences in social and cultural norms will inevitably strain effective and healthy communication among students and between students and teachers, students belonging to the racial, cultural, or ethnic minority are likely to be particularly prone to damaging experiences such as feeling consistently insulted, slighted, or excluded. Chronic triggering of these painful emotions is likely to be a significant risk factor for developing destructive thought and behavior patterns that can have highly detrimental effects on learning and on a student’s overall school experience and well-being (Hermans et al., 2011).

This chapter will propose a new theoretical and practical framework that can be utilized in any type of classroom, including multicultural classrooms, and that actively promotes connection and well-being in students while also being highly protective against potentially traumatic experiences for both students and teachers. The basis for this framework is the proposal that there are two opposing forces, or overall

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“drives,” that operate within all people living in modern cultures (Montgomery & Ritchey, 2008). The first is a global “homeostatic drive” that is biologically designed – in humans as in all animals – to keep each person in a state of physical and psychological “homeostasis,” or equilibrium, whenever possible, and to bring people back into equilibrium or homeostasis whenever they become stressed or out of balance.

The second force or drive in modern life, including in nearly all classrooms, is the maladaptive, dysfunctional “non-homeostatic” or “addictive” drive, which has been suggested to arise under circumstances of “evolutionary mismatch” (Montgomery & Ritchey, 2010) – that is, within environments, such as modern cities, that human beings are not well-equipped for biologically and evolutionarily, and that are therefore considered to be “mismatched” environments (Lieberman, 2013). The modern classroom, and particularly any multicultural classroom, presents a number of evolutionary mismatches that, if not specifically attended to, can be a source of significant traumas and difficulties for both students and teachers. The addictive drive that frequently arises as a consequence of evolutionary mismatch effects has been proposed to throw people inappropriately and dysfunctionally *out* of equilibrium or homeostasis, into unnecessary states of pain or emotional distress (Montgomery, 2012). Studies have suggested that stress hormones, such as cortisol and β -endorphin, that are released by states of non-homeostasis, have many of the same effects in the brain as addictive drugs such as cocaine or methamphetamine (Lekners & Tracey, 2008; Montgomery & Ritchey, 2008). Montgomery and Ritchey (2008) have proposed that the addictive drive develops because thought and behavior patterns that generate painful, distressing states of non-homeostasis can become reinforced in the brain due to the unconsciously rewarding or reinforcing effects of various neurochemicals, such as dopamine and β -endorphin, that are released or triggered by a stress response.

This chapter will argue that for any education and learning to be in any way effective or lasting, it must directly align with and nurture the homeostatic drive within each person or student. It will further argue that the homeostatic drive is the force of all love, critically including *self*-love, a phenomenon of profound importance to any healthy classroom. Full awareness of and continual alignment with the homeostatic drive, and particularly self-love, the chapter will suggest, is critical for the establishment of the most nurturing and effective classrooms. A powerful new practical tool, called “choose love,” that is based on this theoretical framework and that can be used as the guiding principle for any classroom, will also be introduced. The “choose love” tool can be utilized to keep students and teachers aligned with the healthy homeostatic drive – the force of all love and particularly *self*-love – while also keeping students and teachers from being triggered into the destructive addictive drive, which is highly detrimental to the creation of a healthy, functional classroom environment. It will be proposed that this framework, including the overriding ethos of “choosing love,” and particularly self-love, at all times, can generate a potentially transformative classroom that is deeply connecting and that is an ideal environment for learning, for the expansion of self-knowledge, and for promoting the overall well-being and personal growth of both teachers and students.

EVOLUTIONARY MISMATCH AND PHYSICAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL HEALTH

Prior to ten thousand years ago, when agricultural and animal husbandry methods began to develop and spread across the world, all human beings lived as nomadic or semi-nomadic hunter-gatherers and had done so for hundreds of thousands of years. Although there have been genetic changes in the past ten thousand years – such as the spread of mutations that allowed adults to digest milk as adults, or the spread

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