

The emotions research always starts with the classics. An older, brilliant study done was done by emotions pioneer Paul Ekman. You may know the Fox TV series "Lie to Me" is based on his skill set and life's work. Ekman found that when we artificially generated certain facial expressions, it induced the corresponding 'genuine' feelings (Levenson, et al. 1990). Act a certain way, and the emotions will follow. But this door goes both ways. This means, getting kids emotionally aroused can enhance their physical effort (Schmidt, et al, 2009). And when we enhance both, like combine the emotions of social contact with shaking hands, we remember the event better (Nielson and Jensen, 1994). Emotions and physiology are fully linked. Translated, when we arouse emotions in our kids, they are more likely to get off their 'you know what' and start engaging more. Even when seated, emotional responses enhance our memory of the details of the event. But wait; it gets better. If you can focus on engaging the class leaders (the ones that others follow), you have a good chance of bringing on board the rest of the students. Why? Have you ever noticed that when one person yawns, others around often yawn? Actually, some research suggests that emotions are contagious (Wild, et al.2001). Now, when you put all this together (mind, body, emotions, class leaders and peer pressure), you can get classroom miracles. How?

There's a whole new field developing. It's called cultural neuroscience. It's the field of how cultures change our brain. Your school creates a culture. A classroom will have a culture whether you orchestrate it or not. Many teachers actively shape their culture, while those that struggle complain about their class culture. Successful schools consciously shape their cultures while the schools that struggle complain about "how the kids are these days." A great primer on this field was Wexler's book Brain and Culture (2006). Recent studies show that when you use rituals well, you can shape behaviors. In fact, rituals can activate students to do things that require personal sacrifice (wow) because of the peer-power and social effects. This allows teachers to erase problems with task activation, socializing and discipline. The bottom line is that anthropology is now being influenced by neuroscience. Well, you know I love the research, so here it is on our emotional, social and physical states, and the brain's activation for functionality and organizing dynamics.

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