THE CONDITIONS OF DEEP LEARNING

MIRA Notebooks

NOTEBOOK 7 · THE HUMAN ENVIRONMENT

The Bond and the Adult's Gaze

What a student learns also depends on how they are seen

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MIRA model

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Ask an adult about the teacher who shaped them. They will almost certainly not remember the explanations. They will remember that the teacher believed in them when they did not believe in themselves, that they were demanding because they saw them as capable, that they were there when things went wrong. The bond with that adult was not the wrapping of learning: it was, in many cases, its cause. And that is not sentimentality — it is one of the best-documented conditions of deep learning.

This collection has travelled through the conditions of deep learning: how knowledge enters through the senses, how thinking is trained, how attention is protected, which methodologies and which technology favour it, and how the group sustains it. One condition is missing, and it is not the least: the adult who teaches. Not as a technician who transmits content, but as a bond and as a gaze — because what a student comes to learn depends, to a surprising degree, on the relationship they have with the person who teaches them and on what that adult expects of them.

The teacher as a secure base

Educational research, drawing on attachment theory, describes the teacher as an *ad hoc* attachment figure: a secure base from which the student dares to explore, to make mistakes and to learn.[1] A relationship characterised by closeness and low conflict predicts better outcomes throughout schooling — and its effect is even greater for the most vulnerable students.

The logic is the same that runs through the whole MIRA model. A student only risks attempting something difficult — and failing — if they feel safe. That safety is not only internal: it is sustained, in large part, by the relationship with the adult. A teacher who conveys closeness and trust creates the conditions for Resilience to be possible; one who generates fear or indifference destroys them, however good they are at explaining. The bond does not compete with rigour: it is what makes it bearable.

> *Before learning any content, the student learns whether the classroom is a safe place to make mistakes. That answer is not given by the syllabus: it is given by the gaze of the adult in front of them.*

The effect of expectations: the self-fulfilling prophecy

There is a phenomenon as well studied as it is unsettling. In 1968, Rosenthal and Jacobson told some teachers that certain students — chosen at random — were about to make a great intellectual leap. It was not true; but by the end of the year, those students had improved more than the rest. The only thing that had changed was the teacher's expectations. It was called the Pygmalion effect: a self-fulfilling prophecy.[2]

Decades of subsequent research have confirmed that these prophecies also operate in real classrooms, starting from the teacher's spontaneous perceptions. The mechanism is subtle: the students of whom more is expected are given more time to respond, more feedback on their effort, more demanding tasks; those of whom little is expected are corrected less and challenged less — and they end up performing according to what was expected of them, not according to what they were capable of.[3]

This has an ethical consequence of the first order for the teacher: the gaze with which they observe each student is not neutral. Seeing a student as capable is not optimistic naivety — it is, literally, an intervention that modifies their trajectory. And seeing another as a lost cause is, with equal literalness, pushing them to become one. The adult's expectation is an educational force in itself.

Gaze and demand: not opposites

It is worth dispelling a misunderstanding. Caring for the bond and expecting the best of each student does not mean lowering the demand or avoiding error. It is exactly the opposite. The highest form of respect towards a student is believing them capable of something difficult and accompanying them until they achieve it. Closeness without demand is complacency; demand without a bond is sterile pressure. Deep learning lives at

the crossing: an adult who demands a lot because they trust a lot.

It is the same idea of optimal challenge that runs through the model, now seen from the relationship: the adult holds the student in the zone where the task is difficult but achievable, neither abandoning them to frustration nor sparing them the effort. That calibration — how much to demand, when to support — is perhaps the finest competence of the craft of teaching, and it is not learnt in any content manual.

How it fits into MIRA

The bond and the adult's gaze are not a fifth condition added to MIRA's four: they are the medium in which the four develop. The student's Inner life — their self-knowledge, their sense of meaning — is built, especially in the early years, through the gaze of the adult who reflects back to them who they are. Resilience needs the secure base the bond provides. Agency flourishes when someone genuinely expects the student to produce something valuable. And Metacognition is modelled by imitating an adult who thinks aloud about their own thinking.

That is why a model like MIRA cannot be applied 'with its back turned' to the relationship. The instruments, the rubrics, the projects — all the scaffolding — work if they are sustained by an adult who sees each student as capable and offers them a secure base from which to take risks. Without that bond, the instruments are forms; with it, they become learning.

> *You can have the best model, the best methodology and the best assessment. But what switches all of that on is an adult who believes in the student and shows it. The teacher's gaze is the condition that makes all the others work.*

In summary

What a student learns depends, to a degree research keeps confirming, on the relationship with the person who teaches them. The teacher is a secure base from which the student dares to explore, and their expectations operate as prophecies that tend to fulfil themselves. Caring for the bond and expecting the best does not lower the demand: it makes it possible. In MIRA, the adult's gaze is not one more condition, but the medium in which the four conditions develop — the factor that turns a good model into real learning. This notebook closes the collection: we have travelled through the brain, the classroom and the group, and we arrive at the beginning of it all — the relationship between the one who learns and the one who teaches.

Notes

1. Research on the teacher–student relationship draws on attachment theory: the teacher acts as an 'ad hoc' attachment figure and secure base. Systematic reviews of longitudinal studies (e.g. in Social Psychology of Education, 2025) confirm that closeness predicts engagement and performance, with a greater effect on vulnerable students (Pianta; Verschueren & Koomen).
2. Rosenthal, R. & Jacobson, L. (1968). Pygmalion in the Classroom. Holt, Rinehart & Winston. Teachers were given falsely high expectations about randomly chosen students; those students improved more, in a self-fulfilling prophecy (the Pygmalion effect).
3. Subsequent reviews and meta-analyses (Dusek & Joseph, 1983; Harris & Rosenthal, 1985; Jussim & Harber, 2005) confirm the effect in real classrooms. Cooper (1979) describes the mechanism: high-expectation students receive more response time, feedback on effort and more demanding tasks.