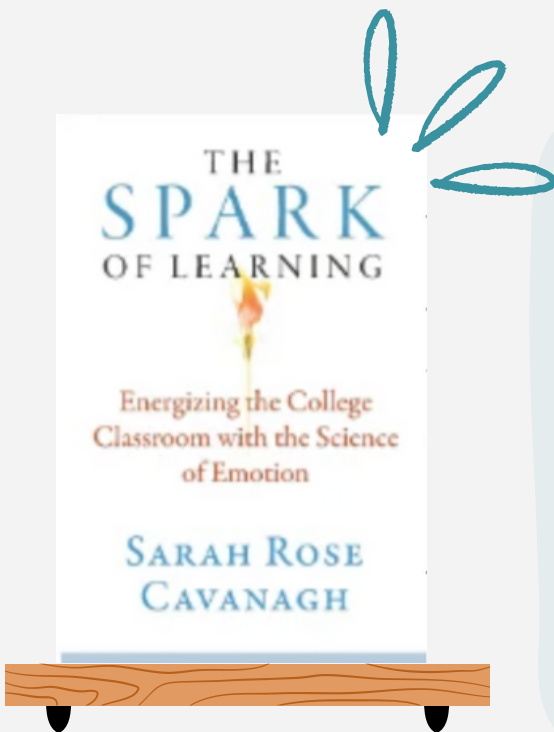# The Spark of Learning
Discussion Guide

The OTL Book Club read and discussed *The Spark of Learning: Energizing the College Classroom with the Science of Emotion* (Cavanagh, S., 2016) in Winter 2021. You can use this document to guide your own reading or start a book club with colleagues. These questions were written by educational developers from the Office of Teaching and Learning at the University of Guelph to help facilitate discussions.

About This Book

The Spark of Learning focuses on the role of students' and instructors' emotions in teaching and learning. Using evidence from neuroscience, psychology, and education, Cavanagh argues that teaching that incorporates emotions is more effective at motivating and educating students than an unemotional focus on knowledge and skills. With a focus on positive (e.g., humor, curiosity, and enthusiasm) and negative (e.g., anxiety) emotions, the book balances research evidence and teaching examples and encourages instructors to focus on emotions in their teaching

Discussion Questions

Introduction

1. How can we be sure that we are being our authentic selves, while also including elements of excitement, interest and curiosity while teaching?

2. Cavanagh argues that using emotion to motivate and engender interest does not mean coddling and that challenging them will energize them as will using emotion. How do we find the balance between challenge and intentional use of emotion in course design and delivery?

Discussion Questions

Chapter 1: The Science and (Neuroscience) of Your Emotions

1. If the information about emotions was new to you, what information stood out to you as relevant to teaching and learning? What will stick with you?

   - How much attention have you paid, consciously or subconsciously, to how emotion impacts student motivation and learning?

   - Was there a time when this relationship became glaringly obvious? If so, would you like to share the story?

Chapter 2: The Wellspring: Emotions Enhance Learning

1. Most of our limited attention is directed inward and what competes for our attention is all emotional and self-relevant. How does that knowledge impact how you feel about and perceive a student's lack of attention and focus during class?

2. On p.41 the author talks about how emotions tag certain experiences and results in long memory formation. She talks about the 'third arm' example using demonstrations and sensory activation (tactile). What are some ways you could or have used emotional tagging in your courses to enhance a students ability to remember material?

Chapter 3: Be the Spark: Crafting Your First and (Lasting Impression)

1. Faculty self-care is shown to be important for successful student learning, but it is often difficult to achieve given the demands. How do we make this a priority - personally and institutionally?

2. Have you used Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction techniques for yourself with the purpose of improving your own teaching practice? If so, how? What mindfulness techniques have you used?

3. How comfortable are you with self-disclosure in a teaching context? What limits you from doing this or regulates what you share? What are the risks of self disclosure in teaching

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Discussion Questions

Chapter 4: Burning to Master: Mobilizing Student Efforts

1. Were you familiar with the concept of flow? Do you think students might enter flow when doing work associated with your course? If so, what activities might be most likely to elicit flow? How could you make this possibility more likely?

2. Do you use any strategies to help make your material self-relevant, and if so, what are your strategies? (pg 117)

3. How do you assess students' knowledge in the course (beyond summative tests, exams, etc.)?

Chapter 5: Fueling the Fire: Prolonging Student Persistance

1. How have you engaged students in a way that is intended to instill engaged, self-directed learning? Have you had students 'return' to tell you (in person, reference letter)? Were any of those a surprise to you?

2. What are specific ways you could or do increase the sense of value in what you are teaching – specifically related to skill or outcome? Have you noticed a different response to students if you had not used this strategy before?

Self-Regulation: Reappraisals

1. Being transparent and revealing the 'why' of learning something (content, skill) is described as a great motivator for students and for self-regulation because it impacts positive emotions. How do you highlight the 'why' of learning for your students?

Discussion Questions

Attributional Retraining (Owning Success/Failure)

1. How have you used learning analytics as a tactic for attributional retraining? How else have you tried to create a sense of ownership over successes and failures in your students?

Mindsets & Procrastination

1. Have you ever tried to give 'growth-mindset' praise (e.g., I can see that you worked very hard on this) instead of 'fixed-mindset' (e.g., you are a strong writer) praise? How did it feel to give that praise?

2. If students procrastinate to manage negative emotions, how could we decrease the negative emotions students experience when working on course-related tasks?

Chapter 6: Best Laid Plans: When Emotions Challenge or Backfire

1. The chapter starts with a description of a professor who attempted to fail his whole class. What role did emotions ('the instructor's and the students') appear to play in this situation?

Test Anxiety

1. Cavanagh offers several suggestions to reduce the physiological and cognitive effects of anxiety (give enough time on assessments so students don't feel rushed, encourage students to practice mindfulness, be clear and transparent with expectations). As a student or instructor, which of these strategies have you found to be effective for reducing anxiety?

Discussion Questions

Justice, Injustice, and the Struggle for Power

1. What some strategies you've used to give student's agency? How do you ensure that course-related decisions are just?

Social Loafing in Small Group Activities

1. How can you ensure that students who are struggling to understand a concept can still contribute to a group project?

2. The research recommends not using end of term peer assessments in group work. Have you used this strategy effectively before? How else can you ensure that students' individual contributions aren't masked? What strategies have you used to give students agency?

Emotional Soup

1. What specific strategies or policies can ensure that instructors preserve empathy, care, and compassion for their students?

The Spark of Learning
Suggested Teaching Strategies

Suggested Strategies

The Spark of Learning contains a diverse array of strategies to help create a supportive and impactful classroom environment for your students. Below we have selected a few strategies highlighted in the book alongside their respective page numbers. We encourage you to dive deeper into the book and explore the larger collection of useful strategies and techniques to transform your classroom.

Strategy	Description	Page
Make Material Self-Relevant	Create assignments where students can relate their lives to the material. Consider assignments were students can incorporate personal interests or belonging into the task.	116
Provide Positive and Encouraging Feedback	Provide students with feedback that is positive and highlights where they can grow and develop.	131
Stretch-It Teaching Technique	Challenge your students by responding to their answers with more questions. Following up and ask them how they came up with the answer, if there are other answers, or to provide evidence.	133

Frequent Assessments of Student Knowledge	**Create low stake evaluations to asses what your students know. Consider small check-ins, 'one-minute papers', or clicker questions to help foster.**	**138**
Group Quizzes	**Have students monitor and submit their daily/weekly progress and reflections.**	**201**
Progress Diaries	**When setting deadlines choose them at times you would be available should students have any last minute questions or concerns.**	**113**