

GOT IT? - EMOTIONAL VS. RATIONAL UNDERSTANDING

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Being in class (whether in the literal classroom or the school of life), is all about understanding things. Both for the students and the teacher. May it be a technique, music theory, a choreography, or a question. But when can we really say we have understood something? When we can do it fast? When we don't have to think about it anymore?

I have been realizing more and more that there is a great difference between rational understanding and emotional understanding. In the arts as well as in life.

We need both

We need all parts of our existence to be a complete human. That is, our body, our mind, our emotions, and our spirit (and maybe more, depending on your beliefs). In order to move through life with integrity, we need to be in tune with all of these parts. Duh.

If I wanted to get super philosophical, I would reflect upon all levels of understanding, physical, rational, emotional, spiritual, and beyond. But for now I would like to focus on just the two, because these are probably the most common ways for us to learn things.

We hear about the connection between the thinking mind and the feeling heart on every street corner. We are afraid of overthinking, or of being too emotional. We are confused about our head and our heart wanting different things (as aptly illustrated here: <http://theawkwardyeti.com/chapter/heart-and-brain-2/>). We might suppress our emotions or not be able to at all hold them in.

And it can be difficult to reconcile our thoughts with our feelings. To figure out how to flow with both at the same time.

Distinguishing between emotional and rational understanding

So the first step is being able to recognize when our brain has understood something and when our heart has understood something.

At least in the context of studying an art form, rational understanding usually comes first. Let me explain: Our analytical minds have to learn some sort of tool first. Without tools, we have nothing we can apply. If we tap dance, we need at least one step, quite literally, in our toolbox. Otherwise we are just randomly throwing our legs around (as done so many times by people who think it's funny to imitate a tap dancer.)

Then, after we spent time with the *what*, we can move on to the *how*. Emotional understanding means internalizing. It goes beyond the mere mechanics of a step. The rational, almost superficial knowledge of our tools has to permeate into our internal world. It's then that knowledge becomes wisdom, and if you ask me, wisdom is the true form of understanding. Our rational knowledge is just a tool to access this inner emotional intuitive understanding. Our minds are a vehicle for our emotions, so to speak. If we are in tune with our mind, we can use it in order to intentionally direct our emotions towards certain things. And hopefully the direction will be love and growth, and not fear and close-mindedness.

It is when we have gotten to the point of internalizing this rational knowledge and bringing it to our emotional being that we can truly master something.

An example: You are in a jam circle. Being stuck in the phase of rational understanding would sound like, "Two people until it's my turn. I'm gonna start with a stamp on the left, then do a double shuffle on the right, and then do that crazy wing step to show people I am good." On the other side, acting only from an emotional place without analytical reflection would sound something like, "I do whatever I want, I don't let the rest of the band dictate my tempo, I don't even know any tap steps, but I don't care." A healthy balance would be to let the mind take care of analyzing the *what* – tempo, feel, energy in the room, etc., to provide a frame for the emotions to flow freely. Within this frame that we choose for ourselves, we are free to do whatever feels right. Our job is to take the *what* and put it into the context of a *how*. This ultimately results in total freedom, I believe.

Move ittt

Emotions make everything come to life. Without emotions, we would just exist. Having the capacity to feel emotions is a key trait in humans. The word *emotion* originates from the Latin "emovere",¹ which means "to move out". Quite literally, that means feelings have to come to the surface in one way or the other. If feelings remain inside, they are just thoughts. Or they become destructive.

Now as tap dancers, all of our practice revolves around moving. However, it is our choice to move because we feel obligated to do so, or if we move because something (far greater than our limited mind) is moving us, and we just can't help it.

Isn't that why we make art in the first place? To connect to our intuitive self, transcend our rational minds, project realities that are different from our current physical reality, and hopefully speak to peoples' hearts, and not their minds?

That is probably the difference between art that is "impressive" and art that is "touching". Now of course art can very well be both, but impressing without touching does not sound very sustainable to me. Touching and impressing at the same time, that is something else! But in that case the impressiveness might not only be generated by the technical intricacy, but also greatly by the emotional capacity.

I have had a number of talks about the notion that nowadays, people in class are just rushing through material, putting steps on top of steps and pushing with a sense of urgency that honestly makes me feel stressed out. It often seems that there is no time to really feel out what is being done, both physically and emotionally. Do you ever spend two hours practicing shuffles, not because you don't know how to execute it, but because you want to explore all the delicacy and emotional empowerment that you can find in that one simple movement?

This is not old school. It's integrity.

At this point, the ego comes at play too. Our mind likes to tell us what we should be doing, whereas our emotions tell us what we are really here to do. The question is, do we let ourselves be guided by our rational, limited mind that believes a lot of what the ego says, or are we guided by our emotions and intuition and then invite the mind to work for us by setting up a frame?

Often we *think* we have understood something, but actually we have just understood it rationally. Emotional understanding requires way more attention and dedication, and in the end is more holistic and sustainable. Rational understanding is just about the thing, whereas emotional understanding is about understanding the general pattern, and then being able to apply it to other things, and our entire

1 <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/emotion>

life really.

That is when art heals.

Everyone can dance a choreography, or play a piece on the piano. But it takes more to understand the art form, and where it comes from, and where you come from.

The process of understanding is not linear, it is never ending, and always comes back in cycles. We learn a lesson, then we play around with it for a while, explore some other paths, take detours, just to eventually revolve back to the original lesson, but now with a different perspective on it, with an even deeper understanding, and more experiences backing up our perception.

And then it starts all over again.