

## **ArtStory and SketchME: Literature and Language in Developing Emotional Intelligence**

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### **Abstract**

*In a world where social media is posing a risk of developing fractured identities and diminish creativity and critical thinking in individuals, it is vital that the educational curriculum adapts to best serve the needs of the young generations. Hence, the paper at hand discusses the importance of creativity in the quest to building a strong self-identity and awareness of one's emotional experiences. Moreover, the paper comes forth with two alternative methods to implement emotional education in language and literature classes by challenging the students with tasks involving self-expression through various forms of art. The goal of the tasks is not only to teach the students to better express and understand themselves, but also to enable them to connect with others on an essential level through expression of one's thoughts and feelings. To accomplish this, the paper arguments how the theoretical framework could be translated into the practical methods presented.*

**Keywords:** *self-identity, emotional intelligence, art, language, literature*

### **Introduction**

The modern world is exposed to an informational overload that has become the epitome of the age of social media. Consequences of this massive intake of information, especially low-quality information, can already be observed in the surging mental disorders, behavioural problems and lack of critical thinking and creativity. One study conducted by the University of London argues that “In the extreme, it seems clear that information overload may lead directly to problems of mental and physical health, as well as loss of efficiency at whatever tasks are being undertaken. Its significance should not be underestimated” (Bawden and Robinson 13).

Before this overload of information, it was rather straightforward for individuals to create an assembly of principles that would carve out their identity and moral compass. This is especially true when one analyses the phenomenon of information anxiety, where “Anxiety in handling information is closely related to uncertainty; the problem may therefore not be the volume of information, but rather the extent of novel information, which cannot easily

be understood, or related to what is already known (qtd. in Bawden and Robinson 24). Considering this, it can be deduced that nowadays those affected by the information anxiety find it rather hard to identify with and integrate values and principles in their identity network. Inherently, this implies that more and more individuals don't have a solid perception of who they are, how they function socially and emotionally and consequently have no sense of purpose or essence. The lack of purpose can incur a number of issues, including self-destructive thoughts or behaviours, as it is stated in an article by Frontiers, "Regarding the population of adolescents, a longitudinal study on high school students showed that increases in purpose predicted increased satisfaction with life and decreased depressive symptoms among both girls and boys" (Barbara Barcaccia et al 2). To fix this growing issue, the paper at hand proposes two educational methods and the theoretical framework they are designed upon.

### **1.1. Identity Formation: An Overview**

In this article's view, which belongs to the author and is founded on rigorous research, identity is perceived as the informational construct that generates human behaviour in each individual. This informational construct is a complex network of conceptual structures organised in a hierarchical manner similar to how the integrated models of reality are organised in the brain, as described in neuroscientist Stanislas Dehaene's book, "the brain is organised as a hierarchy of models of reality, each nested inside the next and learning means using the incoming data to set the parameters at every level of this hierarchy (Dehaene 9). This hierarchy of conceptual structures is formed through the cortical attention schema as named by professor Michael S.A. Graziano, which is a hierarchy of attention protocols that integrate the models of reality into identity,

I explained that the cortex is essentially a machine of attention. But it would not make sense to have attention if it is unfocused and is only directed exclusively by outside elements such as light or sound intensity. It needs an internal control system and a control system cannot operate without an internal model. The attention schema is this internal model – a set of information about the attention process (Graziano 53).

The self is a by-product of this attention schema, which is essential for encapsulating experience into the identity of the individual, "when this etheric mental essence aims at an element, it has the property of making it clear and

real for you, conveying an intense feeling of presence upon it – in other words, it transforms that element into experience” (Graziano 55).

The main role of the sense of self is that it gives the individual *agency*, a term used by professor Janet H. Murray in his book, *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narratives in Cyberspace*. The term denotes “the satisfying power to take meaningful action and see the results of your decisions and choices [...] When we are yielding agency in a well-designed environment, we feel that our actions have meaning because they lead to visible results that we can interpret as signs of our power to shape the environment and to make choices that matter” (Murray 126).

In light of this, the attention schema gives the individual the power to choose among the models of reality that they can integrate in their conceptual hierarchy. Similarly, individuals can choose what aspects of an experience they integrate in their identity, and even more importantly, how they interpret these aspects. For this, however, individuals should be aware of their type of personality and emotional patterns, that are also dictated by experience as most mental maps, “The brain’s maps are not genetically pre-scripted but instead moulded by the input. They are experience-dependent” (Eagleman 49).

Therefore, identity is an integrated systematic network of encoded experiences that the individual can develop and enhance if given the right conceptual tools. These tools can be developed through an insightful understanding of the causal relationship among conceptual networks, the emotions that drive them and the outside stimuli that contribute to their formation. In this paper, the coined term “identity network” will be used to illustrate the overall conceptual constructions and the networks interlinking them that compose a person’s identity.

## 1.2. What Role Does Creativity Play in Identity Formation

In spite of the consistent technological progress, defining creativity still poses a struggle. However, scientific evidence indicates that creativity is a heightened cortical activity, across multiple cortical zones, that fuses neuronal pathways and networks in a novel succession,

Creativity is developed systemically by parallel processing of both divergent thinking (emphasizing on “originality”) and convergent thinking (emphasizing on “utility”) [...] Results showed that divergent thinking was correlated with distributed bilateral brain activation in the left prefrontal cortex and the right medial temporal lobe with deactivation of the right

temporoparietal junction, while the generation of new ideas compared to the retrieval of old ideas showed increased activation in the left hemispheric region located in the inferior parietal cortex (Park et al, National Library of Medicine).

This ability of the brain to flexibly engage and alter multiple cortical areas in thought processing is called neural plasticity, “neural plasticity allows the brain to form new synaptic connections and reorganise existing ones. This means that you can integrate information from different brain regions” (Cloe, *Wired for Innovation*).

Therefore, engaging multiple cortical areas, creativity acts as a high-way for information, creating and enhancing the connections between conceptual networks hence leading to the formation of new and more personalised concepts. In their book, Scott Barry Kaufman and Carolyn Gregoire, mention that creativity is tightly linked to the default mode network, which they refer to as the imagination network, “One of the most important networks at play here is the ‘default network’ of the brain – or as we’ll call it, the ‘imagination network’” (Kaufman and Gregoire 27). The imagination network manages the background processing of inner experience, “Some scientists believe that the discovery of this brain network represents nothing less than a paradigm shift in cognitive neuroscience, from a focus on external, goal-directed task performance to the more nebulous yet omnipresent phenomenon of inner experience” (Kaufman and Gregoire 27).

However, in order for creativity to occur, there are two other networks that work in an intricate tandem with the imagination network. The one that governs attention management, known as the executive attention network, “The executive network is involved in error detection, resolving conflict and other aspects of performance” (Posner et al, National Library of Medicine). The executive attention network also “allows voluntary control of behaviour in accordance with goals” (Posner et al, National Library of Medicine). The third network to aid creativity is the salience network, “which is responsible for motivation” (Kaufman and Gregoire 29).

Having explained roughly how creativity occurs and functions, it is time to offer a more pragmatic example of the creative process in forming conceptual networks. For this reason, the following paragraphs exhibits the way identification with a story or character works.

To identify with a narrative requires the individual to empathise with certain elements from the given narrative. Empathy can be considered a

recognition system for patterns that the individual finds within themselves and perceives in a mirror perspective in other and the narrative they identify with,

The theory of *inner imitation* of the actions of others in the observer has been supported by brain research. Functional magnetic resonance imaging now demonstrates the existence of a neural relay mechanism that allows empathic individuals to exhibit unconscious mimicry of the postures, mannerisms, and facial expressions of others to a greater degree than individuals who are unemphatic (Riess, National Library of Medicine).

But before empathy can happen, the individual uses its theory of mind and mirror neurons to grasp the behaviour exhibited by the object of observation. The theory of mind is described as the “ability to reason about the thoughts, beliefs, and feelings of others to predict behavioural responses. This ability has been termed *theory of mind*” (Byom and Mutlu, National Library of Medicine). While “The mirror neuron system is a group of specialised neurons that “mirrors” the actions and behaviour of others” (Rajmohan and Mohandas, National Library of Medicine). It is these two complementary mechanisms that generate the ability to empathise and ultimately create these similarities between two sets of experiential and behavioural patterns.

Thus, creativity enters the process of identification when these initial mirroring patterns are linked to other traits and knowledge from past experience, thus enlarging the individual’s identity network by forming a grid of concepts derived both from personal experience and the narrative. In this context, *identity perspective* is another term coined in the context of this paper to reference a person’s ability for incorporating and interlinking these new concepts so they contribute to the personal development and to nurturing enhanced behaviours and emotional patterns. The identity perspective also enables the individual to understand the cause of certain emotions, thoughts or behaviours so they can be optimised or overwritten.

### **1.3. How Can a Developed Identity Perspective Improve Emotion Regulation**

Developing an identity perspective enables the individual to understand the causal relationship between concept networks and reactions in the context of personal experience and personality traits. This affirmation is derived from the theory of emotion developed by neuroscientist Lisa Feldman Barrett, who explains that emotions are actually constructed, “In these cases of disgust,

longing, and anxiety, the concept active in your brain is an emotion concept. As before, your brain makes meaning from your aching stomach, together with the sensations from the world around you, by constructing an instance of a concept. An instance of emotion” (Barrett 30).

Deriving from the quotation above, concepts are constructed using outside stimuli in a given context and comparing that input data to integrated experience, a phenomenon called prediction, “Through prediction, your brain constructs the world you experience. It combines bits and pieces of your past and estimates how likely each bit applies in your current situation” (Barrett 59). Moreover, each instance of a concept is fuelled by affect, “Affect is the general sense of feeling that you experience throughout each day. It is not emotion but a much simpler feeling with two features” (Barrett 72). Nonetheless, affect bestows a certain impression on each experience, hence concept, categorising it in the hierarchy of conceptual networks. Ultimately, according to the type of affect, a concept can be correlated with a certain instance of emotion, “This phenomenon is called affective realism, because we experience supposed facts about the world that we created in part by our feelings” (Barrett 75).

In light of these, the identity perspective is a key ability to be developed so that the individual can deconstruct its conceptual networks, thus understanding what contributed to the formation of emotional patterns, thought patterns and behavioural output. The process of deconstruction is mentioned in Barrett’s book,

When you deconstruct an instance of emotion, you begin to see it not as a singular, inevitable experience, but as a product of multiple influences: your body budget, your past experiences, the current situation, and the concepts your brain applies to make sense of all these factors. By breaking down an emotion into its components, you gain insight into its causes and can potentially change your experience (Barrett 174).

However, the same process can be applied to the identity network, where individuals can understand what narratives, events or influential sources developed certain principles and codes of conduct in them. And this is the main role of the identity perspective, which operates not only with emotions, but also with narratives.

Moreover, depending on different scenarios, the individual can reconceptualise its own role in a given situation, thus juggling between conceptual networks similarly how a computer fetches different data sets from memory to fulfil different tasks, as explained by Barrett, “If the self is a concept,

then you construct instances of yourself by simulation. Each instance fits your goals in the moment. Sometimes you categorise yourself by your career. Sometimes you're a parent, or a child, or a lover" (Barrett 191).

#### **1.4. How Can Language and Literature be a Means for Developing an Identity Network**

Conceptual networks have been a central aspect of Sapiens' cognitive mechanism ever since the Cognitive Revolution. In this complex orchestra of cortical development and environmental factors, language engendered the human ability to juggle with and construct conceptual networks that ultimately materialised in a human world, where human thinking and behaviour drive progress. Just as professor Yuval Noah Harari exposed in his renowned books, narratives have been a key factor in constructing our human legacy, in dictating behaviours and thinking systems,

Legends, myths, gods and religions appeared for the first time with the Cognitive Revolution [...] Thanks to the Cognitive Revolution, *Homo Sapiens* acquired the ability to say 'the lion is the guardian spirit of my tribe'. This ability to speak about fictions is the most unique ability of Sapiens language (Harari 27).

Consequently, the main writer of narratives and concepts is our language, which aided our species to bypass the slow genetical evolution, "In contrast, ever since the Cognitive Revolution, Sapiens have been able to change their behaviour quickly, transmitting new behaviours to future generations without any need of genetic or environmental change" (Harari 37). Therefore, language closely interconnected with the human cortex, has enabled humans to re-program their behaviour according to conceptual networks. What is more, is that these networks remain flexible and can change in accordance with a given context, hence giving the possessor of such a skill an unprecedented evolutionary advantage.

In light of these, language and literature can be considered renderers for mental simulations where new concepts are forged out of input data fused with integrated experiential data. In other words, literature, through the means of language, projects the individual into a mimetic simulation where they can assimilate new experiences and ultimately concepts, some of which are either to some extent or thoroughly mirrored by the individual's personal experience. Philosopher Daniel Denett argues that "Our fundamental tactic of self-protection, self-control and self-definition is not spinning webs, but telling

stories, and more particularly connecting and controlling the story we tell others - and ourselves - about who we are” (418).

This ability for self-projection into a narrative and then eventually enlarging one’s identity network through experiencing that narrative, is a main driver that makes consuming fiction so entertaining. Additionally, the self-projection occurs through creatively assembling one’s experience with that one of the characters inside the narrative, “Literature, particularly the novel, can present the consciousness of characters in ways that not only reflect but also shape our understanding of what it is to be a self” (Lodge 61). Imagination plays an equally significant role in rendering such fictional augmentation, “While video games offer a more direct form of immersion by allowing players to interact with the game world, literature achieves a different, but no less profound, immersion by engaging the reader's imagination and emotions through carefully constructed narratives” (Mukherjee 73).

Therefore, literature, through the medium of language, can aid individuals in developing new conceptual networks that engender behaviours and emotional reactions in typical situations.

## **2.1. SketchMe: Outer Representation of the Identity Network**

In order for an individual to create a strong and stable identity network, they first should understand the conceptual networks already integrated in their internal model of the world and of themselves. To accomplish this, the paper is going to further present two pioneering educational methods as suggestions developed by the author.

The first method is inspired from the individual’s ability to create an instance of themselves in a given context, as presented in Lisa Feldman Barret’s theory. The method aims to help the students understand according to what affect states and integrated principles they acted in a given moment in their life, or why they would act in a certain way in a fictional scenario. To make the method more efficient, even narratives can be used to create a simulation where the students can use their agency to explore decisions and their consequences as well as create fictitious characters that share similar emotional and behavioural patterns as the individuals who created them.

The method, named SketchMe, intends to put students through a number of interactive activities that project their conceptual networks into

various creations such as artwork, games and literary works to assess why the individuals had a certain reaction to various situations.

The basis of this educational method entails three phases to ease the individual into their inner world of conceptual networks. The first phase, entitled “Getting to Know Yourself” is rather simple and requires the students to take an amount of time to think of three principles that describe who they are according to their day-to-day behaviour and perceptions. To simplify the principles, the students are asked to find a word for each principle, thus establishing an umbrella concept to serve as a network’s basis. These three principles and their respective conceptual basis can be referred to as “identity parameters”, which is term coined in this paper to illustrate the basic units of a person’s current identity network.

The second phase entails the students choosing a life experience that altered their identity network. After reflecting on the selected experience, the students are asked to paint three panels, each representing a stage of the identity network development throughout the experience. Therefore, the first panel will depict the identity network before the experience, the second panel will describe the intermediary identity network during the experience, then lastly the final panel will exhibit the identity network after the experience. Each panel will be assigned three identity parameters to enable the individual to perceive the changes in a more transparent manner.

The last phase of this method’s basis requires the students to use the identity parameters derived from these exercises in order to construct an alter ego which they have to put in a story or simulated situation. One way to perform this transition is through role-play in a theatrical environment such as a figurine theatre. The student can design a character out of clay and use the identity parameters to render their current identity network in a contextual environment created by them. It is story writing and storytelling in a more personal and dynamic fashion.

There is one more condition however: the alter ego must reflect upon their own emotional and behavioural patterns throughout the play, similar to a character in a novel that has an inside monologue. This theatrical output of one’s identity network using concepts to enhance the understanding of underlying mental mechanism, can aid the students to grasp an ampler and more insightful perspective on how they function as humans.

## 2.2. ArtStory: Augmentation of the Identity Network

The previous educational method focused on exhibiting through concepts, painting and acting the current identity network of the individual. ArtStory is a follow-up method that is destined to augment the identity network by integrating conceptual networks through immersion in narratives through various means. This method can be implemented using a variety of art forms, from music videos to video games. But to offer a brief and intriguing example of employing this method, the following activity will be put forth.

A passage from a novel is cut into its constituent paragraphs and/or sentences. The passage must contain a powerful emotional essence or a lesson the character has learned. For the example's sake, two pages from the murder scene in *Crime and Punishment* will be used as reference. After the passage is divided into sentences and paragraphs, the students are asked to pursue an imaginary case where they have to enter the mind of the criminal to re-enact the scene. For this purpose, the bits of the text must be hidden strategically in a room or area with clues and props.

Area set up concept: A few scraps of paper with a few thoughts related to the criminal's personal philosophy. A few pictures that portray the criminal's domestic background. A prop involved in the murder (the axe). For each clue or prop, the students must closely inspect the nearby area to find a piece of the murder passage.

After all the pieces have been found, the students gather in a semi-circle around a panel where they must stick the text pieces to recreate the whole passage, but while also using the clues they found amid the passage to render a broader perspective of the identity network behind the character's deeds. The students receive three threads of different colours. Each colour represents respectively an emotional causal link, a principle causal link and a behaviour output.

One student, the head detective, will write down the connected patterns in the character's conduct and a group of students assigned as the board of psychologists will run an analysis of how these patterns contributed to the act of murder.

This activity, somewhat similar to SketchMe, projects the individual in a simulation where through outside observation, they can harness a better understanding of the causal relationship between circumstances and mentalities, as well as emotional management and behaviour. However, this activity is not focused on the individual, but rather on a fictional or

biographical narrative the individual can use as a template for later self-reflection.

## Conclusion

By conceptualising the emotional patterns, behavioural conducts and thought processes, the students can deconstruct their instances of self and gain more agency in their day-to-day decisions and instances of emotions they produce. The methods presented alongside the theoretical framework, attempt to develop an education focused on identity development and enhancement by bringing neuroscience and psychology into the daily education through means that nurture students' creativity, intuition and identity perspective.

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