

→ Education

Playing Cupid

Romance belongs in the classroom. I'm not talking about the stuff of Harlequin Romance novels but a different kind of love — the love between student and subject. For me, as a creator/producer of media for kids, romance also belongs in the living room, the backseat of the car, and anywhere else kids access educational videos and games. And my job is to play Cupid.

When I studied at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, the one thing that stuck was a turn-of-the-20th-century theory of learning by Alfred North Whitehead. He believed that there are three components to learning: romance, mastery and generalization. Romance is the stage in which we fall deeply in love with a subject. We hear a Chopin Prelude and are filled with the desire to play the piano. Mastery covers everything involved in becoming proficient in that subject. So, for piano, it means practicing, playing scales and learning to read music. Generalization is when we apply what we've learned in a novel context. So having mastered Chopin, we demonstrate generalized learning when we pick up a Bach Prelude and perform it with aplomb.

All three ingredients are key to learning, according to Whitehead. Yet in this teach-to-the-test era, we tend to overlook romance in favor of mastery and generalization.

But that may be changing.

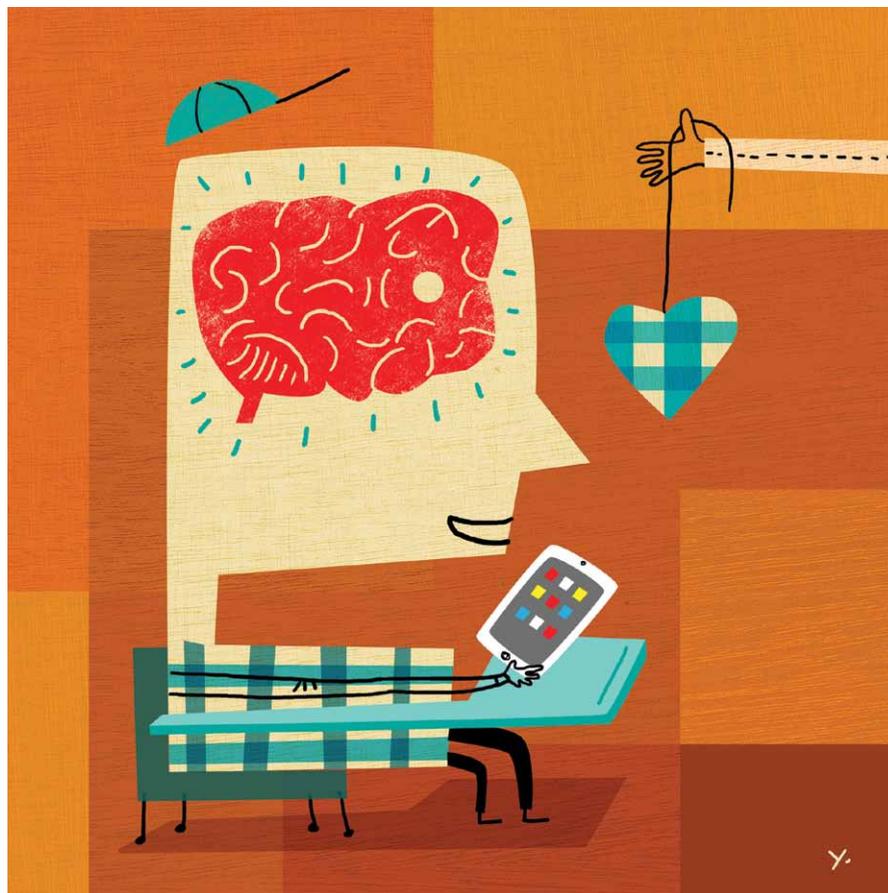


ILLUSTRATION BY JAMES YANG

John Gabrieli's research out of MIT uses neuroimaging to peer into the brain to better understand the biology of learning. He's discovered that when our brain's pleasure center is turned on — when we have a desire to learn — we learn more. In other words, our emotions play a big role in learning. They not only motivate us to learn, but they actually help to create a receptive state for receiving and retaining information. So romance really does belong in the classroom and anywhere else learning happens. Like on screen.

A good educational television show can be a great Cupid. The medium is uniquely primed to romance — to deliver stories and characters that engage, excite and hopefully inspire kids to

want to know more. Good teachers do that too, of course. I certainly credit my love of storytelling to a few phenomenal English teachers who inspired it. All educators, whether we work in the classroom or the living room, have the ability and now the mandate to play Cupid. We just use different arrows. Mine are relatable characters, surprising stories and humor.

Whatever your arrows are, keep in mind that a love of learning — be it curiosity or full-blown infatuation — is a critical ingredient to a successful education. And make it your mission to play Cupid, as well as skill-builder, taskmaster, coach and all the many roles required in this complex pursuit called teaching. ●



DOROTHEA GILLIM created *WordGirl* for PBS and now is executive producer of *Curious George*, both Emmy Award-winning shows. Before working in television, Gillim taught fifth grade.