BOOK REVIEW

Social: Why Our Brains Are Wired to Connect
By: Matthew D. Lieberman
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The winter holiday break is a great time to reflect on the best and worst of the last academic semester, and look for ways to tweak one’s instruction in light of recent research. In Social: Why Our Brains Are Wired to Connect, author Matthew D. Lieberman offers readers insight into human behavior based on a new realm of science: social cognitive neuroscience.

Research into how our brains respond to the social world is of recent origin, and Lieberman’s book chronicles the research in an easy-to-read style while offering advice on how to use the findings to improve the lives of individuals, businesses, and schools. Over the last 20 years, Lieberman and his colleagues have relied on functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI), to study how the human brain responds to the social world. Lieberman says, “We are wired to be social. We are driven by deep motivations to stay connected...These connections lead to strange behaviors that violate our expectation of rational self-interest and make sense only if our social nature is taken as a starting point for who we are.”

The first two-thirds of Social is dedicated to summarizing the various studies that Lieberman and his colleagues or others in the field have completed. There are too many studies to outline here, but the key finding among them all, according to Lieberman, is that our brains appear to respond in very similar ways to both the physical world and the social world. For instance, we experience physical pain and social pain in neurologically similar ways, making distinctions between them less meaningful than perhaps we have always assumed. If our brains are wired to connect socially, and if we want to make the most of our lives, our organizations, and our society at large, we need to make sure we are tapping into our social brains in effective ways. Our brains appear to be deeply motivated to connect with others. Thus, if we understand better what motivates us, would that not in turn mean that we could do a better job at motivating others as well? According to Lieberman, the answer is “yes,” and he offers some advice on how to leverage his findings in “the real world.”

In Part Five of the book, “Smarter, Happier, More Productive,” Lieberman offers several insights into the social brain that could prove beneficial for an educator. One of the most important findings for teachers and students is the fact that social pain is real, just as real as physical pain. Sometimes when we do not see pain in the form of a broken bone or illness, we minimize it, even when we don’t mean to do so. If it’s not front-and-center in our sights, we easily forget that it is...
humans are motivated by the social world, however, we also know that there are distinct ways personality or temperament. How the research may benefit people in their daily lives. In addition, the relationship between personality or temperament and the social brain is not discussed. Lieberman contends that all humans are motivated by the social world, however, we also know that there are distinct ways humans are motivated by the social world, however, we also know that there are distinct ways

Another key idea in the book revolves around motivation. According to Lieberman, our brains are wired to connect socially and so we care deeply what others think about us. Some studies suggest that we actually care more about what others think of us than we do about money or other material objects. We want people to like us, and we will do a great deal and give up a lot to receive the commendation of others. Teachers spend a lot of time thinking about how to reward their students, believing rightly that rewards are an important component of motivation. Sometimes we reward with prizes or bonus points, but the research suggests that those things may be less important to our students than simple recognition and praise. Social regard is a reward in and of itself; it is a free and renewable resource, and can be implemented in the classroom immediately.

If students are motivated by the social world, it makes sense to bring the social world into the classroom as much as possible. Lieberman argues that schools too often try to shut the social world out, rather than use it to motivate students to perform well academically. The result is a seemingly endless battle between teachers trying to get students to focus on a lesson and students’ brains wanting to focus on themselves and their friends. Lieberman’s contention is that allowing students to be more social in their learning may result in more learning overall. He argues for incorporating more social practices like peer tutoring to engage students’ social brains as they learn the necessary content and skills.

All these and other insights that Lieberman covers are beneficial for teachers and students even if they are not particularly surprising or new. A criticism: the book would have benefited from more time spent on developing these ideas fully, and less time covering the various studies that led to these conclusions. As it is now, the author provides only a brief summary, around 60 pages, on how the research may benefit people in their daily lives. In addition, the relationship between personality or temperament and the social brain is not discussed. Lieberman contends that all humans are motivated by the social world, however, we also know that there are distinct ways
extroverts and introverts prefer to socially interact. Having read Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World That Can’t Stop Talking by Susan Cain, I wondered about the difference between an introvert’s and an extrovert’s social brain. Is there a difference, and if so, how would it affect Lieberman’s findings?

Overall, Social was a pleasant, relatively quick read that provided some good reminders to teachers about using what we know our students care about deeply to motivate them in the classroom. It seems we can never be reminded too much that our students will be more willing to put in the hard work if we can find the thing that motivates them and interests them the most. According to Lieberman, we would be wise to use our students’ need to interact with the social world to fuel their engagement in the classroom.

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