



# Sentipensar, or Feel-thinking: A Critical Pedagogy for Learning

Photo and research for this tool come from a research partnership with the [Vermilion Sea Institute](#)

## What Is The Issue?

Learning about and taking action to disrupt the dynamics of inequitable, multifaceted phenomena is full-body, emotional, and cognitive work that inherently provokes a [range of complex affective responses](#). However, binaries between rationalism and emotion have come to define “good science”—and “good science learning”—as objective, neutral, and, therefore, void of emotional bias. Even learning that is community-grounded, culturally relevant, and focuses on important social issues is expected to be sterilized of feeling, which ultimately prevents learning from being genuine, consequential, and transformative.

## WHY IT MATTERS TO YOU

- **Educators** should learn to legitimize more holistic forms of sensemaking, such as [feel-thinking, and to engage with learners' emotions as sensemaking resources](#).
- **Curriculum Developers** should embrace the [“affective turn”](#) and create instructional materials that support thinking about and with our emotions, along with [embodied ways of knowing](#).
- **Environmental scientists** should make visible [the role feelings play in their own scientific practice](#), rather than [separate these from their research design or erase them from public-facing communications](#).

## Things To Consider

Science learning is an emotional experience—especially when it concerns culturally relevant, personal, and justice-oriented topics. While at times challenging, [epistemic affect catalyzes scientific curiosity, concern, and ultimately stabilizes disciplinary engagement](#). Learners’ rapid shifts in emotions also point to important sociocultural connections and ideas, which “[prime” educators and the learning community to commit to deeper sensemaking](#) and explore different learning pathways. Many educators have not learned to engage emotions as key sensemaking resources—and it is common for heightened emotions (especially unexpected or challenging ones) to be misinterpreted, policed, mitigated, shamed, or neglected.

Instead, educators should embrace the Indigenous Latin American concept of [Sentipensar \(feel-thinking\)](#). This [critical, fully embodied approach to learning and being in the world](#) does not separate emotion from reason, nor care from knowledge. It legitimizes heart-mind sensemaking as a vital practice that supports collective thriving.

Research has shown that when youth and adult learners engage in Sentipensar (with or without the support, intentional or not), it can...

1. Foster more honest and communal sensemaking of observations, data, protocols, etc., often motivating a responsive action
2. Clarify, or deepen, existing understandings — which often shift or deepen important values and ethics around knowledge of the topic
3. Be used in self-determination to defend oneself, one’s community, surrounding environment, other life, and other things they care about
4. Cultivate science identities and collective worldbuilding toward [future thriving](#) that radically resists common doom and despair narratives

By drawing prolonged attention to particular ideas and events, [Sentipensar is a compass guiding individual & collective thinking, ethical decision-making, and action](#). This feel-thinking often requires deeper engagement with accepted [Science and Engineering Practices](#), because real contextual matters, people, community, and visions of the future are distinctly centered within learning. In this way, Sentipensar defies foreclosed futures by taking up speculative thinking to honor what the world should be as first steps of building a better future.

## Attending to Equity

- Different cultures and communities have varying norms for how, when, and with whom to express and process emotions. Learning to [desettle what learning science looks like](#), and [accept diverse forms of sensemaking](#), will help cultivate respect for multiple ways of knowing.
- Learners from marginalized backgrounds, who are deeply impacted by what is being learned (e.g., local pollution, sea level rise), often experience and express more challenging emotions. Rather than censor or police these responses, [offer support and understand these moments as indicators of deep knowledge, care, and calling for collective action](#).

## REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- When have you seen your students engage in Sentipensar? How did / might you respond?
- How does Sentipensar align, or not, with how you think about sensemaking in science learning? What do we need to unlearn to make room for feel-thinking?
- How might the world around us change if Sentipensar became an accepted and valid dimension of scientific sensemaking?

## Recommended Actions You Can Take

- Learn about [eco-emotions](#) from the [rapidly expanding field!](#) There are [many resources for learning more about mental health and tools processing emotions](#).
- Develop a practice of slowing down to do personal emotional check-ins and engage in Sentipensar. Work on identifying how you are feeling, the cause, how this connects to what you’ve been learning/teaching/doing, consider responses, and reflect on this sensemaking process and outcomes once you have had more space.
- Learn to notice learners’ emotional responses during learning. Do so without judgment—focus on identifying what happened, what was said, and how others responded. Be curious about what is being expressed and the impact it has.
- [Develop instructional routines to use with learners to support them](#) in discussing their feelings and connecting these to learning, and their ideas of self and the future.

### ALSO SEE STEM TEACHING TOOLS:

- #108 [Research on Climate Emotions](#)
- PD [Diverse Sense-Making](#)
- #80 [Reframing Eco-Anxiety](#)
- #104 [Socio-ecological Language](#)

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