Connections: Critical for Teaching and Coaching

Dr. Mark Williams, an Australian cognitive neuroscientist and author of, "**The Connected Species: How the Evolution of the Human Brain Can Save the World,**" frames connection as a fundamental social and neural bond that shapes how we perceive, think, and learn. Connection changes how we hear and see others. People whom we feel connected to are attended to more, believed more readily, and empathized with more deeply than those we don't feel connected to. Our brains literally respond differently depending on whether we feel connected to someone—connection affects perception and neural processing.

Neuroimaging studies show that social connection and exclusion are processed in brain regions overlapping with physical pain. Since the brain treats relational disconnection as a survival-relevant signal, learning is biologically secondary to belonging. Williams reports on a study that recorded the brain response in teachers and their students while they were in class.

They recorded EEG from all participants simultaneously during a learning session. Where there was a good connection between teacher and student, the brain activity of the students and the teacher were more synchronized relative to those students who had a poor connection with the teacher. Connection literally predicted brain synchrony during the lesson. Importantly, the students who "synced up" with their teachers tended to remember more about the content and got better grades. Connection is that important.

When students feel connected to a teacher, the brain responds in powerful ways:

- Auditory and visual processing of the teacher's input is

enhanced
- Students' brains show greater readiness to encode information
- Mistakes are processed as learning signals, not threats

When connection is weak or broken, the brain responds by:

- The same teacher voice triggers filtering, disengagement, or stress
- Students may comply behaviorally while disengaging cognitively

Connections might be explored in coaching conferences:

Coach: Thanks for inviting me in today. How did you feel during the class?

Teacher: Honestly? A little flat. I felt like I was working hard, but not everyone was with me.

Coach: When you say "not everyone," whose faces are you seeing?

Teacher: A few students in the back—especially Jordan and Keisha. They usually participate more.

Coach: What's your relationship like with Jordan and Keisha outside of moments like today?

Teacher: Jordan's usually chatty with me before class. Keisha checks in after school sometimes. We normally connect pretty well.

Coach: What do you think they usually get from that connection with you?

Teacher: I think they feel noticed. Like I actually care about what's going on with them.

Coach: That feeling of being noticed impacts learning. (pause) As you picture today's lesson, where did those moments of

being noticed show up—or not show up?

Teacher: I greeted them at the door, but once we started, I was pretty focused on getting into and through the content.

Coach: What do you imagine Jordan and Keisha might have been needing from you during the lesson—not instructionally, but relationally?

Teacher: Maybe a quick check-in. Or eye contact. I didn't really circle back to them.

Coach: Sounds like you are reflecting on your own attention when you're worried about pacing?

Teacher: Yeah, I probably narrow my focus and stop scanning the room for cues.

Coach: Thoughts?

Teacher: I could pause more frequently, scanning the room and asking a couple of students how confident they're feeling.

Coach: That pause and scan is valuable. Easy to miss when feeling pressed.

Teacher: I think I'd feel more grounded. Less like I'm pushing alone.

Coach: Is there a way to explore this in a future coaching session?

Teacher: Could you pay attention to whether I'm noticing students early enough—before disengagement shows up?

Coach: You bet. Look forward to returning.

If connection so powerfully shapes how students hear, process, and remember instruction, we need to remember what that means for coaching. Coaches, like teachers, rely on conversation, attention, and trust to influence learning. Coaching works for

the same reason teaching works: connection changes what the brain is able to hear and do.

When teachers feel connected to a coach:

- Coaching questions are processed as curiosity, not judgment
- Feedback is more likely to be encoded, remembered, and acted upon
- Risk-taking feels safer—trying something new feels possible
- Reflection deepens because the nervous system is regulated

When connection is weak or fragile:

- Even skillful questions can feel evaluative
- Suggestions may be filtered out or politely ignored
- Teachers may comply without truly engaging
- Coaching becomes episodic rather than transformative

In other words, connection predicts coachability.

Connection in coaching shows up when coaches:

- Listen for emotion as much as for strategy
- Signal genuine interest before offering insight
- Match pace, tone, and attention to the teacher's state
- Treat reflection as shared meaning-making, not diagnosis

The coaching dialogue above illustrates this stance. The coach never rushes to "fix" the teacher's practice. Instead, the conversation builds alignment with attention, trust, and shared focus so that insight can emerge naturally.