

Confused? Don't worry because that can be a good thing

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Don't be confused for too long. Credit: Flickr/Tactical Technology, CC BY-SA

Confusion is a common aspect of our lives but it can be useful and perhaps even necessary, particularly when we are trying to learn something.

Confusion is typically experienced when we are confronted with new information. It is particularly likely to happen when the information we encounter is complex, counter-intuitive or unlike anything we've

experienced before.

When this happens it can be difficult to reconcile the new incoming information with what we already know.

For example, we might find a maths problem confusing because we don't know what the mathematical symbols mean or have difficulty with calculations.

Confusion occurs because the prior knowledge we have leaves us ill-equipped to deal with new information.

Regardless of whether confusion occurs because things are overly complex or seemingly illogical, it is always associated with some sort of cognitive impasse, when we experience a difficulty incorporating new information into our existing way of understanding the world.

This is why confusion is referred to as an [epistemic emotion](#), that is, an emotion specifically associated with the development of our knowledge and understanding.

Unproductive and productive confusion

When people are trying to learn something new, confusion is often seen as a negative, something to be avoided.

Few of us would readily think that a positive learning experience was associated with the state of confusion. The most obvious reason for this is that confusion, when it persists, can very easily [escalate to frustration or boredom](#).

From here it is only a short step to disengagement and giving up on trying to progress any further.

It is for these reasons that many teachers try to avoid situations where students are confused in their classes.

But [our own research](#) and [that of others](#) suggests that confusion, rather than being a negative, can actually be a productive aspect of the learning process.

Feeling confused can serve as a marker that something isn't working – it is by definition a signal of a cognitive impasse – and as such can be a particularly helpful cue for both students and teachers.

The key is to ensure that when confusion occurs, it is recognised and it is not allowed to persist for too long.

Recognising confusion

So to make sure we benefit from confusion, we first need to recognise and admit to being confused.

Most participants in our studies have been reluctant to admit to experiencing confusion. It is only revealed later through in-depth interviews.

This is not surprising as there is a negative stigma attached to confusion. It is often unfairly thought of as a sign of stupidity or a lack of intelligence.

So a key way to harness confusion when you are challenged with new concepts or ideas, is to recognise that confusion exists. Be comfortable with this, but seek to resolve it.

Feeling confused is sometimes difficult in a world which often has a bias towards explanations of [complex ideas](#) that are simplified and easy to

take in.

For example, in new media environments, complex ideas and concepts are often presented in a documentary-like fashion: slick, fluent, engaging and entertaining.

Increasingly online videos routinely explain complex scientific processes with striking, easy to follow animations, accompanied by dulcet, highly scripted narration.

The ideas presented feel like they make sense at the time. But if the ideas do not challenge us in a fundamental way, they might not be being processed deeply enough to lead to any lasting learning.

Such environments may lead us into having a false level of confidence in our understanding of complex concepts. Glossy, high production value resources have been shown to give people an [inflated sense of understanding](#).

Learning to embrace the confusion

It can be easy to find information about highly complex phenomena, such as climate change or vaccination, that seems easy to understand and aligns well with our intuitive conceptions (or misconceptions!).

In part this is because the internet has made it easy to find highly engaging and appealing explanations of phenomena that are very good at cutting down the complexity to make these concepts understandable. It may also be that we gravitate towards interpretations of events that fit with our prior conceptions.

But if the benefits of confusion are to be realised, we are coming to understand two key lessons.

First, being confused about complex concepts and phenomena can mean we are investing enough mental effort into trying to understand. Not finding novel, complex ideas confusing at first can be a sign of overconfidence which has been reliably [shown to be detrimental to learning](#).

Second, it is critical to see struggle and confusion as an important part of the [learning process](#). When encountering new, complex ideas, it is useful to find them challenging and confusing, so long as the confusion does not persist too long.

The struggle associated with overcoming [confusion](#) helps us to find better strategies for understanding the world.

So the next time you feel confused when trying to learning something new, take comfort in knowing that it might mean you are on the right track.

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