Pedagogical resources
AQUATIC ACTIVITIES

# IN SEARCH OF AQUATIC COMPETENCE. FROM EMOTION TO REASON FOR ACTION

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# IN SEARCH OF AQUATIC COMPETENCE. FROM EMOTION TO REASON FOR ACTION

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**Aquatic competence develops by integrating emotions and reason into decision-making in the water. Emotional management and practical wisdom promote safe, conscious and appropriate actions. This approach promotes autonomy and meaningful learning.**

## Introduction

According to the **Comprehensive Aquatic Method (MAC)** (Moreno-Murcia, 2026), aquatic competence goes far beyond learning to swim. It involves developing physical, cognitive and emotional skills that enable a person to function with greater confidence, autonomy and responsibility in the aquatic environment. In this context, aquatic education is presented as a comprehensive training process, in which every decision made by the learner, from entering the water to facing a new challenge, is mediated by both rational and emotional factors.

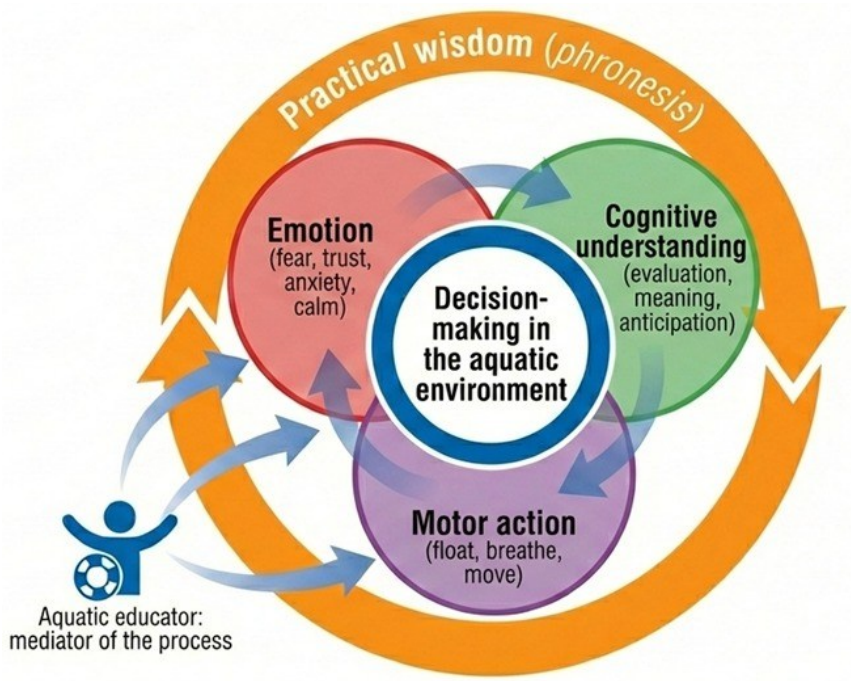
In recent years, educational research has begun to **recognise the fundamental role that emotions play in decision-making**. As Martínez-Priego & Romero-Iribas (2024) point out, there is a close relationship between emotions and phronesis according to Aristotle, understood as practical wisdom, that is, the ability to act prudently and sensibly in specific situations. This perspective is particularly relevant in the aquatic environment, where emotions such as fear, euphoria, anxiety, and confidence directly influence the way learners assess risks, take on challenges, and execute their actions (Moreno-Murcia, 2025).

From a neuropsychological perspective, Feldman (2024) argues that emotions do not emerge from a specific region of the brain, but rather from the integrated functioning of the brain system as a whole. He also suggests that emotions are not recognised or identified as pre-existing entities, but are instead **constructed from lived experiences and our perception of them**, both our own and those of others, depending on the demands of the situation. This process occurs through a complex interaction of systems that allows the person to interpret the context, give meaning to what they feel, and adjust their behaviour in an adaptive way.

This document explores how sound decision-making in aquatic education can be fostered through the recognition and management of emotions. Through a pedagogical approach that integrates the emotional and the rational, specific strategies are proposed to help educators accompany their learners in the development of true aquatic competence: one that manifests itself not only in technical mastery, but also in the ability to act consciously,

balanced and safely. Figure 1 summarises the MAC's integrative model that guides the development of this work, showing the relationship between emotion, understanding and action in decision-making in the aquatic environment. Aquatic competence is built through the dynamic interaction between emotion, cognitive understanding and motor action, articulated in decision-making within the aquatic environment. This process is regulated by practical wisdom (phronesis), with the educator as the mediator of learning.

Figure 1. MAC's integrative model.




## Decision-making in aquatic learning

In the aquatic learning process, each student is constantly faced with decisions that determine their progress: from jumping into the water for the first time to trying a new technique or facing their fears. These decisions do not occur in isolation; they are influenced by a series of factors that can either encourage or hinder the student from acting responsibly, persistently and safely. Understanding these factors is key for teachers to create conditions that encourage positive decisions in the aquatic environment.

One of the first elements to consider is individual differences in self-regulation ability, commonly associated with "willpower". Some show greater self-control and tolerance for frustration, while others are more easily overcome by fear, distraction or the desire to avoid effort. In the aquatic environment, these differences become very evident: some throw themselves into the challenge, while others hesitate or avoid it. It is therefore essential to adapt the activities, offer progressive support and encourage personal confidence, allowing them to develop this ability over time.

Another aspect that influences decision-making is the perceived magnitude of the reward or challenge. Floating for five seconds is not the same as swimming a whole distance for a child, just as not everyone attaches the same value to passing a test, receiving praise or winning a medal. Therefore, teachers must identify what motivates each student, present meaningful but achievable challenges, and use positive reinforcement tailored to their interests and personal progress. This encourages decision-making that is more focused on effort and personal improvement.

Physical condition also plays a decisive role. A student who arrives tired, cold, hungry or sleep-deprived will find their ability to make appropriate decisions in the water reduced. Their coordination, attention and willingness to try something new will be affected. In these cases, the educator's role is to observe, relax requirements when necessary and promote an environment in which physical well-being is guaranteed: water at a comfortable temperature, sufficient breaks and active listening for signs of discomfort.

However, it is also true that a practice tailored to the characteristics of the student and their state at that moment can promote internal and emotional readjustment, even acting as a form of "cleansing" that allows them to transition from one emotional state to another. Emotional state directly influences behaviour and decision-making, so that emotions such as anxiety, fear of failure or sadness can block initiative and limit participation, while feeling secure, accompanied and emotionally supported encourages the taking on of challenges and confidence in one's own abilities. In this sense, the experience gained during practice and the socialisation that takes place in the learning group are decisive factors, especially when an emotionally positive climate is created in which mistakes are understood as part of the process, and the bond with the teacher provides the necessary security to explore new possibilities.

Facilitating sound decision-making in aquatic learning does not only involve teaching techniques, but also providing educational support that comprehensively addresses the motor, emotional and cognitive processes that are activated while the student learns to swim. From this comprehensive perspective, the teacher does not act first as a technical transmitter and then as an observer of the student, but as a guide who understands the participant as a whole during the practice itself, guiding, motivating and accompanying the learning process. In this way, confidence and personal improvement emerge naturally in each session, while building a more meaningful learning experience that is tailored to the student's reality.

According to the above, emotions play a key role in how people respond in the aquatic environment, influencing their ability to learn and apply skills. To encourage appropriate decision-making, the following should be considered:

- **Recognising emotions**. Before entering the water, it is essential that learners identify their emotions. A useful exercise is to ask them, "How do you feel about the water today?" and guide them through a brief reflection.
- **Risk assessment**. Simulate situations in the pool where learners must assess the conditions of the environment before acting. For example, have them observe the depth, the distance to the safe exit, and safety of the area before jumping into the water.
- **Building confidence and self-control**. Through progressive exercises, educators can help learners face their fears. For example, if a person is afraid of floating, it is possible to provide support, then move to a flotation device and gradually transition away from using the flotation device.

## The relationship between emotions and practical wisdom (reason) in aquatic education

In aquatic education, the relationship between emotions and practical wisdom (Martínez-Priego & Romero-Iribas, 2024) is essential to ensure that learners not only acquire technical skills but also develop sound judgement in decision-making in the water. Emotions can be both facilitators and obstacles to learning, and managing them appropriately allows people to act prudently and effectively in an environment where safety and confidence are essential.

**The role of emotions in aquatic learning.** Emotions are natural responses that influence how learners perceive and react to water. For example, fear can prevent a person from submerging or floating naturally, while uncontrolled euphoria can lead to unnecessary risk-taking, such as jumping from rocks into the sea or running around the pool and jumping into the water with their peers.

From a pedagogical perspective, it is essential to help learners identify and recognise their emotions before, during and after each aquatic experience. To do this, the aquatic educator can use guided questions such as: How do you feel in the water right now? How does this experience make you feel? Do you feel tension or discomfort in any part of your body? This process promotes emotional self-awareness and allows learners to adjust their responses and make more appropriate decisions in the aquatic environment. However, this work requires professionals to value and respect learners' responses and, when appropriate, offer tailored emotional support, gradually guiding them towards new sensations and experiences that increase their safety and confidence in the water.

**Practical wisdom in aquatic decision-making.** Practical wisdom, understood as the ability to make the right decisions at the right time, is important in the development of aquatic competence. It is not just about knowing swimming techniques, but about constantly assessing environmental conditions, anticipating risks and acting prudently. For example, an experienced swimmer with emotional control will know when to rest to avoid exhaustion or how to react to an unexpected current without panicking. To foster this ability in learners, educators can simulate scenarios where they must evaluate different options and make informed decisions, such as choosing between different strategies for moving through the water efficiently and safely.

**The dual structure of emotions and practical wisdom.** Emotions and practical wisdom share a dual structure: on the one hand, they provide evaluative information about reality (we perceive whether a situation is safe or risky) and, on the other, they drive us to action (we act accordingly). In the water, this mechanism becomes particularly relevant. If a learner feels anxious before attempting to float, their instinctive reaction may be to tense their body and sink rather than relax and trust in the buoyancy of the water. Here, the role of the educator is key in transforming that emotional response into a learning opportunity, guiding the learner through breathing and body control exercises that reinforce their confidence and ability to adapt.

**How emotions enhance practical wisdom.** Well-managed emotions can strengthen practical wisdom, facilitating better decision-making in the aquatic environment. Hope and confidence, for example, motivate learners to progressively push their limits, while caution allows them to respect their own pace and limits without taking unnecessary risks. A useful exercise in this regard is to encourage self-assessment after each practice session, asking learners what emotions they felt and how these influenced their performance. In this way, they can recognise patterns and develop a reflective mindset that helps them improve with each session. For this process to be effective, students need to understand conceptually what they are learning by constructing concepts through language, visualisation, and practical experience. This understanding allows them to assimilate and relate what they have learned to action, answering questions such as what they are doing, how they are doing it, and why they are doing it. From a more practical perspective, this approach contributes to the mastery of knowledge, know-how and interpersonal skills, integrating knowledge, action and attitude into the aquatic experience

**How practical wisdom regulates emotions.** Emotional regulation is built by experiencing, feeling, and understanding emotions. Therefore, students must be able to identify and relate what they experience physically and emotionally to what is happening to them. For example, during a jumping activity, the student may become rigid and notice that their heart is beating faster; recognising whether this corresponds to fear or panic will allow them to understand their reaction. This awareness is key to enabling them to master the emotion they are feeling and apply appropriate strategies to regulate it. Thus, a swimmer who understands how to distribute their energy in an endurance event does not get carried away by the emotion of the moment and manages their effort better. Similarly, a learner who knows how to float or breathe correctly is less likely to panic in an unexpected situation. Educators can work on this aspect by simulating scenarios in which learners must make decisions under pressure, such as deciding what to do if an object falls into the water or how to react to waves, encouraging a more appropriate and conscious emotional response.

## The interaction between emotions and practical wisdom in aquatic education

Recent research has highlighted the importance of building concepts not only through verbal and body language, but also through lived experiences and meaningful images. This process of conceptual formation allows learners to understand what emotions are, how they manifest themselves in their bodies, and how they influence their responses to different situations (Feldman, 2024).

For concepts to make sense, they need to be felt, perceived and experienced. Only then can learners understand why they do what they do and for what purpose. This approach encourages the creation of mental images that become consolidated in the brain and can be recalled and used during future actions. In this way, learning becomes deeper, more meaningful and easily transferable to new situations.

Following the proposal of a dual psychological structure of emotions, based on evaluative knowledge and the tendency to act, this dynamic takes on special relevance in aquatic teaching. The learner not only cognitively interprets the situation, but also adjusts their behaviour based on what they feel and what they have learned to value, integrating emotion, understanding and action into the same educational process.

- **Perception of the aquatic environment.** A suitable exercise consists of asking learners to close their eyes for a moment before entering the water, listen to the sounds of their surroundings, feel the temperature of the water and mentally observe the space they are in. Based on this perception, a mental image of the environment is created that provides emotional security and prepares the student for the activity.
- **Regulated emotional response.** It is advisable to use breathing exercises to relax learners before a challenging task. For example, before attempting a first dive, they can be asked to inhale deeply, hold their breath for a few seconds and then exhale slowly. This exercise promotes breath control, encourages calmness, and helps to reduce or control the emotion of fear.
- **Sound decision-making**. Presenting situations in which learners must choose the most appropriate action encourages reflection before acting impulsively. For example, when asked “What would you do if someone needed help in the water?”, the student is led to analyse the situation, make conscious decisions and experience emotional satisfaction associated with control and choice. This process promotes the development of autonomy and practical wisdom in the aquatic environment.

## Implementation for action

To integrate these principles into aquatic education, teaching strategies can be designed that promote the connection between emotions, such as coping with fear, and conscious decision-making. The aim is for learners to reflect on what they can do, whether it is safe to do so and, if not, what alternatives they have to act appropriately. Table 1 presents examples of predominant emotions at different moments of the aquatic experience and the associated teaching interventions, from a perspective consistent with MAC, aimed at promoting appropriate decision-making and the development of aquatic competence.

Table 1. Teaching intervention according to the emotional moment in aquatic learning.

| Moment | Predominant emotion | Teacher intervention |
|---|---|---|
| Before the task | Fear, doubt | Guided questions, breathing |
| During the task | Tension, alertness | Support, feedback |
| After the task | Relief, pride | Reflection, verbalisation |

- **Breathing and relaxation exercises.** Before each session, a brief deep breathing activity can be performed on the shore to reduce anxiety and increase concentration. During this time, the educator should guide the construction of a positive mental image that promotes active emotional control. For example, students can be invited to imagine that their fear is in their hands and asked what they are afraid of, such as insects or animals. Then, they are asked to imagine crushing that fear with force and then blowing intensely on their hands to let it go. This dynamic can be repeated several times, varying the fears and ending with the verbal affirmation "I can," reinforcing confidence and self-perception of control.
- **Decision-making games.** It is important to create playful scenarios in which learners must decide and act quickly. For example, when asked, "If the current pushes you, how would you react?", they are invited to try different strategies in the water. These situations should begin with progressive activities, such as an aquatic motor story, in which the student mentally constructs the scenario and responds to the challenges that arise. An example might be to imagine that they are travelling down a river in a boat, lying on a mat, when suddenly a big wave appears. Faced with this situation, they are asked what they can do, such as paddling faster. Then, once in the water, with or without auxiliary equipment such as floats, new instructions are given, for example, how to reach the edge of the pool or what to do if they get tired, encouraging quick and appropriate responses.
- **Reflection on aquatic experiences.** At the end of the session, it is advisable to hold a round of comments in which each learner can share how they felt, what decisions they made, and what could be improved in the next class. This instance, known as the final assembly, is essential for students to reflect on the decisions made, analyse their results, and collectively identify the most appropriate options. Active dialogue promotes group cohesion, as well as the development of socialisation, respect, and decision-making skills, which are essential for the development of socio-affective emotions.

## Conclusion

When approached from a comprehensive perspective, aquatic education transcends the technical domain to become a space for personal, emotional, and ethical development. Throughout this document, it has been argued that decision-making in the aquatic environment cannot be understood solely from an instrumental perspective, but must include the recognition, regulation, and integration of emotions as an essential part of the learning process. The relationship between emotion and practical wisdom, or phronesis, in Aristotelian terms, allows the learner to assess situations, act prudently and adapt to the challenges of the aquatic environment with greater confidence and autonomy.

The role of the educator in this process is key: not only as a transmitter of techniques, but also

as a facilitator of experiences where students can reflect on their emotions, build confidence, and develop sound judgement to guide their actions. Strategies such as self-reflection, simulation of real scenarios, breathing exercises, and emotional assessment before and after each activity are pedagogical tools that enhance aquatic competence from a formative perspective. To this end, the educator must understand what emotions are, what reactions they provoke in both the student and themselves, and how they influence behaviour. This knowledge will enable them to generate appropriate teaching proposals so that students can virtually experience emotions, i.e. understand them, experience them and respond to them consciously and appropriately.

In short, promoting aquatic competence involves educating from emotion to reason for action. This means training people who, beyond knowing how to swim, know how to act responsibly and with balance in an environment that demands attention, control and decision-making. Understanding and applying this connection between emotions and decision-making not only improves aquatic performance but also contributes to the development of lasting and meaningful learning for life.

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