

Teacher's Presence in the Classroom

Asqarova Ziyodaxon Elmurodjon qizi

Fergana State University, English language and literature faculty, third course student

The demands of modern education on standardized performance pull us further and further away from a sophisticated and nuanced understanding of what it means to teach. Simple explanations of teaching and learning now run like this: excellent instruction leads to excellent learning, which is correlated with high test scores. Low test scores are a clear indication that poor instruction leads to poor learning. The voices of instructors and students are being marginalized, and we are losing sight of what it means to educate as less time, money, space, and value are allocated to a more complicated idea of education.

This article offers an alternative paradigm and defines teaching as a genuine connection in which educators get to know their students and their learning, and they respond to them with compassion and wisdom. We characterize this involvement as "presence"—a condition of attentive awareness, openness, and connection to the psychological, emotional, and physiological processes of the individual and the group within the framework of their learning environments, as well as the capacity to react in a way that is most thoughtful and caring.

Most people will be familiar with the sensation of presence, especially from their past experiences as students. Many of us have encountered teachers who, with the mere touch of a metaphorical finger, could provide us with precisely what we required, no more, no less, at precisely the right moment. A teacher who could understand, make sense of, and successfully respond to our needs, strengths, and experiences as learners while being present.

Presence as connection to self

From the perspective of the teacher, presence is the act of giving one's entire self their undivided attention in order to perceive what is happening in the moment. The foundation of presence can be found by going back to the Latin origins of the words "attend" and "perceive." "To stretch toward" is the meaning of *attendere*, the Latin source of the word attend. "To listen or pay close attention to; to accompany; to remain ready to serve" is one of the definitions given. The Latin origin of perceive, *percipere*, means "to seize wholly, to see all the way through." Other definitions of perceive include "to become aware of in one's mind; achieve understanding of" and "to become aware of directly through the senses, especially to see or hear."

John Dewey (1933) used the adjective "alive" in his book *How We Think*. "Give full time and attention to observation and interpretation of the pupils' intellectual reactions," the teacher wrote. [She] needs to be aware of all ways that a mental illness can manifest physically, in addition to being perceptive to the meaning of every word that is spoken (p. 275, emphasis added). He addressed attending and perceiving as previously mentioned by incorporating attention, observation, and interpretation. He also mentioned aliveness as "an active and alert commerce with the world" in Dewey's 1934 book *Art as experience*, or, to put it another way, as an aesthetic experience: "*Experience in the degree that it is experience is heightened vitality. Instead of signifying being shut up within one's own private feelings and sensations, it signifies complete interpenetration of self and the world of objects and events. ... it contains the promise of that delightful perception which is aesthetic experience*". (p. 19)

The relational dimension of presence

Relational psychologists have studied connectedness in great detail over the last 20 years. What Janet Surrey (1991) defined as mutual empathy is a crucial component of connection: "Being with" entails "being seen" and "feeling seen" by the other as well as "seeing the other" and "sensing the other's "feeling seen," which is the experience of mutual empathy." page 55. According to Surrey, mutual empathy requires that a person be visible to another person and feel as though they are being seen in order for a person to be connected to them. "Relationship authenticity" goes hand in hand with reciprocal empathy. According to her, it is "the need to be seen and recognized for who one is and the need to see and understand the other with ongoing authenticity" (p. 61).

It's interesting to note that when a teacher-student relationship breaks down, there's a crucial learning opportunity. Although we may all wish we could, a teacher is not able to be physically present to all of their students at all times. It is crucial to find out what makes a teacher lose contact with her students.

First-year high school Spanish teacher Kayla described a recent incident in which she lost contact with her students. It was, in a way, a typical high school scene. Kayla was enraged because her students were acting badly, some of them hadn't finished their homework, and the disengaged ones were bothering the other students. Kayla explained, saying, "I felt like my classroom had gotten out of control, that the students no longer respected me, and that I was acting like I didn't respect them either." After weighing her options, she arranged the desks and chairs in a circle the following day and struck up a discussion with her students.

The pedagogical connection

A teacher's pedagogy is the most obvious part of their presence, much like the leaves and branches of a tree. It covers interactions among students, between the students and the subject matter, and between the teacher and her students. The teacher pays special attention to the material and her students' engagement with it in this third dimension of presence. She is focusing on the actual process of learning, watching students at work, evaluating what she observes, and reacting with what Dewey called "intelligent action." The reflective process of teaching is embodied in this process of observation, analysis, and thoughtful response (Rodgers, 2002a,b).

The challenge of maintaining students' interest in the subject matter arises once they become involved with it. If diagnosing a problem is the first step, then responding to it and supporting students' learning in line with that diagnosis is the next. The core of presence is this sequence of observation, diagnosis, and caring reaction. It is the foundation of reflective teaching and is continual and iterative. Erroneous diagnoses are sometimes just as significant and helpful as accurate ones. Each provides details regarding the knowledge, needs, and lack thereof of the students. A response should ideally help the students discover the nature of the phenomenon they are involved in, rather than hiding it, in order to maintain their interest in their investigation (Duckworth, 1987; Hawkins, 2002).

Conclusion

In addition to knowing and trusting themselves, teachers also need to know and trust their students and the environments in which they operate. Students must also have a strong sense of self-worth and trust in both their educators and the educational institutions where they attend. Teachers build this knowledge and trust on a daily basis by maintaining a connection with their communities, students, themselves, and the learning of their students.

References

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