

The Presence of the Teacher: Theory into Practice

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Abstract

The concept of presence of the teacher augments the “social presence” and “teacher presence” components of the community of inquiry (COI) theory and points to the significance of the being-ness of the teacher in pedagogy. This chapter presents various theoretical framings of the presence of the teacher, along with research that supports its value in achieving student success and enhancing student learning outcomes in online and face-to-face learning. The chapter ends with suggestions for implementation and an argument for the importance of the presence of the teacher in higher education.

Overview

[It] doesn't really matter what the teacher talks about. You remember all those classes you took in college? It doesn't matter what was said. What we remember are a few presences. What was being taught was the presence of a few people, and there was a connection between the presence and us. But we sat there and took notes and thought we were studying the French Revolution or duck embryos or something, when what we were really learning about was coming through the teacher. (C. Barks, personal communication to T. Coburn, December 21, 2011, in Coburn, 2013, p. 7)

These are telling words from Coleman Barks, eminent translator of the works of Jalāl ad-Dīn Rumi, to Thomas Coburn, former president of Naropa University. They echo Palmer's (2007) famous line from the first page of his classic *The Courage to Teach*: "We teach who we are" (p. 1).

Online, distance education modalities are becoming more commonplace every year (Allen & Seaman, 2014). In the past twenty years, there has been a considerable amount of scholarship centered on the development of effective and meaningful learning communities as a means of enhancing student learning, particularly within online, distance-education settings in postsecondary education. The work of Anderson, Garrison, and other scholars (Anderson, Rourke, Garrison, & Archer, 2001; Garrison & Arbaugh, 2007; Garrison, 2009; Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 1999) in developing "communities of inquiry" (COI) through "social presence," "teacher presence," and "cognitive presence" has been central to advancing effective online learning and is based on the sociocultural perspectives of Vygotsky (1978). The core argument for these perspectives is that learning is socially influenced and situated and that we need to pay attention to the social dynamics of learning.

The ontological conceptions of the presence of the teacher can add richness to the formulations of teacher presence and/or social presence in the models of communities of inquiry in online or face-to-face settings. The current formulations of communities of inquiry are reviewed, outlining the ontological models of teacher presence in the works of a number of scholars, and discussing the implications of and offering specific recommendations for the teacher's presence with respect to pedagogical practice and teacher training.

Review of the Literature

The Community of Inquiry Model

A major milestone in distance and online education occurred with the development of the community of inquiry (COI) model developed by Garrison, Anderson, and Archer (1999). A community of inquiry is composed of teachers and students in any educational setting, where learning occurs as a result of three necessary elements: cognitive presence, social presence, and teaching presence (see Akyol & Garrison, 2008, 2011, 2014; Archibald, 2010; Chakraborty & Nafukho, 2015; Garrison & Arbaugh, 2007; Lin, Hung, & Lee, 2015).

Cognitive presence is "the extent to which the participants in any particular configuration of a community of inquiry are able to construct meaning through sustained communication" (p. 89). It is the foundation of critical thinking and engagement. *Social presence* is "the ability of participants in the Community of Inquiry to project their personal characteristics into the community, thereby presenting themselves to the other participants as "real people" (p. 89). It is about generating authenticity in learning (Sung & Mayer, 2012), covering the affective and relational dimensions of learning (Savvidou, 2013). *Social presence* supports the development of cognitive presence. *Teaching presence* consists of, first, the design, organization, and presentation of both the curriculum and the pedagogy. Second is the facilitation of learning by the teacher. Teaching presence supports both social and cognitive presence.

The COI model began as a social constructivist design of teaching and learning. Annand (2011) argued that it has become an empirically based objectivist paradigm that surrounds higher education. Rourke and Kanuka (2009) concluded that students reported more superficial learning in COIs: an "uncritical acceptance of new facts and ideas" in contrast to that which was "deep and meaningful" (p. 24). The authors concluded that the COI model in practice had deficiencies in allowing critically informed, deep, and meaningful learning. Annand (2011) also questioned whether social and teacher presence had any significant impact on student learning and concluded that they needed to be re-conceptualized. However, recent research does support the significance of social presence

(Cobb, 2009; Cui, Lockee & Meng, 2013; Garrison & Arbaugh, 2007); Brooks and Young (2015) discovered that meaningful teacher communication was significant in enhancing a positive emotional experience of students. Finally, Bentley, Secret, and Cummings (2015) pointed to the evolution in defining social presence, pointing, again, to the significance of the affective dimensions in learning.

The theory surrounding the presence of the teacher is meant as a response to this call for the continuing evolution of social presence. Tsiotakis and Jimoyiannis (2016) asserted that we need a more complete understanding of teachers' performance, interactions and collaborations, and learning impact within online communities. A more expansive, ontologically based conception of teacher and social presence that can significantly contribute to a deeper cognitive engagement and enhanced learning outcomes should also be considered. A few approaches are cited below.

Martin Buber: Presence as Dialogical Being

Buber's (1958/2000) concept of presence is part of his dialogical philosophy and the formation of the *I-Thou* relationship. Each person in the relationship is fully present to the other. Individuals place themselves squarely in the here and now in meeting the other. The meeting is "continually present and enduring" (p. 27). Participants advance themselves into the relationship with the "whole being," even in the face of the uncertainty of the encounter, being open to what emerges in the encounter.

The individual also represents convictions, beliefs, and values. The dialogical teacher offers an "answer from the depths, where a breath of what has been breathed in still hovers" (Buber, 1947/2002, p. 77). This is the person who thinks "existentially," who "stakes his life in his thinking . . . standing his test" (p. 95) with conviction and a sense of self and place. Out of a personal experience of his, when a young man came to him in crisis, Buber (1947/2002) wrote:

He had come to me, he had come in this hour. What do we expect when we are in despair and yet go to a man? Surely a presence by means of which we are told that nevertheless there is meaning. (p. 16)

Cohen and Bai: Enlightened, Exceptional Teachers; Enlightened Teaching

Cohen and Bai (2008) used Daoist principles in creating an "enlightenment field" in the classroom. "I don't believe I can know what is meaningful to students unless and until I make a connection with those students and find out something about who they are and their individual needs" (p. 4). They advocated for a "heuristic" process of developing self-awareness and teaching from that state of awareness.

You can learn to trust that you and your students are in the midst of the infinitely creative and complex *dao-field*, and there, practice being in a Zen state, at any moment. Focus now, not just now, but every now that you are able to notice. You can notice your physical self, your breath, your heart's beat, your thoughts, sounds, movements, activity, and so on. Just notice whatever you notice. Follow your own awareness. Invite your students do the same. . . . Find the connection between observer and observed, and realize that there is no separation, only points along the way that are interconnected. ("Begin Here," last para.)

In their investigations of award-winning, exceptional postsecondary educators, Cohen, Porath, and Bai (2010) noted that the personal grounding and experience of the teacher has been ignored in favor of promoting specific teaching methods. However, they find that exceptional educators don't have a method but rather "enact human and humane qualities," have a deep self-awareness, empathic sensitivity, and a "finely tuned sense of the intersubjective" (p. 2). The authors demonstrated authenticity and congruence of thought, feeling, and somatic awareness; they have an "in the moment demeanor or manner of being" (p. 8).

Meanwhile, students report feeling "truly recognized," safe, and accepted, with a deepened sense of their own "groundedness and connection," encouraged to express themselves freely (Cohen et al., 2010, p. 4). Exceptional educators have an "exceptional ability to be present to students, and accompany them, side by side or, at times, hand in hand, in their learning journey" (p. 5), and they identify presence as "the ability to be consciously present in-the-moment; to be able to see, feel, know, and

notice present experience, which enhances the potential for a strong, felt connection between educator and learners” (p. 5).

Farber: Teaching and Presence

The presence of the teacher is, for Farber (2008), simply “the condition of being present. Of being fully present” (p. 215). The teaching is “alive,” and the teacher also brings forth presence: “Each person there is an absolute center and . . . an emissary: from a family, a set of locales, a set of social contexts, a long history of nights and days” (p. 216). The teacher recognizes and works with the situation and contextual complexity of each individual present, allowing the potential of the student to appear.

Because the classroom is present, immediate, and alive; because of its complexity and multidimensionality; because what takes place in it is physically and socially situated; because it allows a lively and productive interplay between cognition and affect: for all of these reasons, it is a place where learning can reach deep, can establish within each individual a wide range of connections and of kinds of connections, can be integrated, can be memorable, can be transformative (Farber, 2008).

Farber (2008) added that the presence of the teacher allows students to be fully present, to fulfill what Freire (2000) called their “ontological vocation to become more fully human,” (p. 75). Farber pointed to the ontology of presence in teaching, noting it “is nothing we can lock up, nothing we can hold on to, nothing we can simply pull off the shelf and run” (p. 223).

Rodgers and Raider-Roth: Lived Presence and Educational Discovery

Rodgers and Raider-Roth (2006) expressed concern that current standardized and positivistic learning environments take teachers away from the “complex and nuanced notion of what it means to teach” (p. 265), causing teachers to avoid the relational and affective interactions and hospitable class climate that are essential. These authors, too, point to the ontology of presence, conceptualizing it as “alert awareness, receptivity and connectedness to the mental, emotional and physical workings of

both the individual and the group in the context of their learning environments and the ability to respond with a considered and compassionate best next step” (p. 265). Stieha and Raider-Roth (2012) suggested presence has cognitive, affective, and relational dimensions, pointing to past research highlighting the significance of meaningful relationships between students and teachers.

The teacher brings her whole self and attentiveness to the moment-by-moment encounter with the student, one “of recognition, of feeling seen and understood, not just emotionally but cognitively, physically and even spiritually” (Rodgers & Raider-Roth, 2012, p. 267). Nel Noddings (2003) similarly noted: “What I must do is to be totally and non-selectively present to the student—to each student—as he addresses me. The time interval may be brief but the encounter is total” (p. 180).

Integration into the Student Experience

Integration of the presence of the teacher into the online or face-to-face learning experience is both simple and profound: be fully present, whether with the students in a classroom or online. Begin by developing and deepening the dialogical virtues (Scott, 2011) that enhance the ability to engage with students in a learning community.

Deepen awareness (including self-awareness), emptiness, openness—what Cohen detailed as “inner work” (Cohen & Bai, 2008; Cohen, Porath, & Bai, 2010). Rodgers and Raider-Roth (2006) referred to Waks’ (1995) work on developing emptiness and keeping the mind open to fully engage with students.

Be willing to let curricular engagements unfold instead of trying to rigidly steer them; by being receptive to students’ longings and needs, teachers can better serve them. Farber (2008) created curricular plans that are open and permeable, allowing for student input and direction. Davis and Sumara (2007) championed a willingness to sit with what will emerge, advocating a pedagogy of “interdiscursivity”: honoring diverse discourses and reflecting diverse cultures and epistemologies in learning conversations. When the teacher is present, she can “attend, sensitively and vitally, to the living reality of another human being. The teacher’s ‘fluid center’ is ever moving in response to all the conditions of the continuum between the inner . . . and outer worlds” (Davis & Sumara, 2007, p. 6).

And as Farber (2008) stated, to be present is to be willing to be vulnerable and not “out of the picture.”

So we wrap ourselves in whatever insulation comes to hand: a formal and forbidding, or even arrogant, manner; an inflexible agenda; a set of props, videos, PowerPoint presentations, whatever; or workshops or other small-group activities that leave us, day after day, largely out of the picture. (p. 223)

It is important for teachers to confirm and respect the whole presence of the students, including their ideas, cultures, and episteme (Savvidou, 2013; Sung & Mayer, 2012). Caudle’s (2013) research pointed to the value of trusting environments in enhancing learning outcomes.

[assume] a connected stance. In this stance students must have a sense that their teachers can see them and their learning, their strengths and their weaknesses. Not only do they see but they also accept what they see. (Rodgers & Raider-Roth, 2006, p. 278)

Be mindful of the sociocultural, historical, and political contexts of students; everyone is learning in mediated contexts, and everyone is all the time positioning and being positioned (John-Steiner & Mahn, 1996; Morgan, 2011; Wertsch, 1993).

Teachers can be authentic (Palmer, 2007), sharing themselves (Sung & Mayer, 2012) as a means of deepening the relationships with other learners. They can allow themselves to become shaped by the emergent discourses. Sharing the learning outcomes is valuable, allowing students to responsively engage with and modify these (Tsiotakis & Jimoyiannis, 2016).

Finally, following Tsiotakis and Jimoyiannis (2016), developing presence, and through that recognizing an engaged learning community takes time and patience and cannot be forced. Being present requires a willingness to go, step by step, into the unknown, the emergent, and the imaginative.

Proven Practices, Examples, and Results

Caudle (2013) researched the impact of a mixed-mode approach of working with preservice teachers. Caudle (2013) found that students

appreciated her facilitating and caretaking roles in enacting her presence; she disclosed her emotions, gauged students’ affective responses, and responded to students’ curricular, emotional, and relational needs, working toward a “trusting environment” (p. 119). Dzubinski’s (2014) research of a multinational online learning community demonstrated the possibility, through the presence of the teacher, of developing a safe environment in which students feel appreciated; feedback did not separate the curriculum content, instruction, and social and emotional aspects of the learning environment. Brooks and Young (2015) surveyed 268 university students and showed that students felt the teacher’s openness and affectively sensitive communication was valuable in their learning. Chakraborty and Nafukho (2015) discovered through an extensive literature review that the teacher’s “immediacy”—the teacher’s presence and open availability as perceived by the students—was significant in student learning.

As an example, Heesoon Bai and the author once taught an online undergraduate education course with eighty students. As instructors, they made themselves fully open, available, and responsive to the students. They disclosed their goals, values, hopes, and fears. They engaged in the online conversations, facilitating and encouraging responses from students. This course received the highest student evaluations in the history of online and distance education at the university (K. Jayasundera, personal communication); student feedback repeatedly acknowledged appreciation of their presence in the learning community.

Lessons Learned, Tips for Success, and Recommendations

In applying presence as a way of being, what counts, paradoxically enough, is practice. It includes study and work on developing presence through openness, vulnerability, responsiveness, confirmation of and respect for the other, celebration of otherness and diversity (including epistemic positions different from our own), pedagogic sensitivity to emerging curriculum, a holistic sensitivity to the physical/somatic, aesthetic, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual needs of the students as an ethical response. And along with practice, reflection as a part of praxis.

Gockel (2015) recommended mindfulness practice as a means of developing both awareness and presence. Bai, Cohen, and Scott (2013) have

repeatedly advocated contemplative forms of inquiry and engagement in developing one's presence as a teacher (Bai, Martin, Scott, & Cohen, 2016; Bai, Scott, & Donald, 2009).

Conclusion

The concept and practice of being and becoming fully present as a teacher is nothing new. The roots for presence of the teacher go back as far as Socratic, Confucian, and Daoist principles of teaching. In 1910, John Dewey (Boydston & Hickman, 2003) wrote:

The teacher must be alive to all forms of bodily expression of mental condition—to puzzlement, boredom, mastery, the dawn of an idea, feigned attention, tendency to show off, to dominate discussion because of egotism, etc.—as well as sensitive to the meaning of all expression in words . . . [and] the state of mind of the pupil. (pp. 338–339)

The presence of the teacher is what Rodgers and Raider-Roth (2006) offered as a “moral imperative, psychological stance, and an intellectual trajectory” (p. 284) in creating a just, democratic society. Bentley, Secret, and Cummings (2015) stated that social presence as manifested by the teacher can transform learning, grounding it in connectivity, exchange, and collaboration. Coming into presence offers teachers and learners the opportunity to become more fully human and then to teach better.

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