

Teacher Presence: Extreme Dissonance and Subtle Tuning

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I want to thank Cristina Cammarano for her carefully argued phenomenological exploration into the question and nature of teacher presence in the classroom. I admit to sharing many of the concerns expressed in her essay: the endless reductionism in the teaching profession, the overreliance on measurement, and the seeming slide to total removal from the classroom of a living teacher. To lend support while also seeking to illustrate and enrich her argument, I want to respond in two ways. First, in keeping with the bluesy theme of the 2015 Philosophy of Education conference, I will take the, admittedly improvised, discordant position of an imagined “educational technician.” By playing piccolo trumpet and harpsichord to the more sonorous flugelhorn and piano of the essay, I hope to challenge those seeking to protect teacher presence to actively respond to the “we no longer need human teachers” side, for it is not the choir that needs convincing. I name this position Enlightenment 2.0.¹ The second response will be a reflection on an event that recently happened in my own teaching. The focus, as with Cammarano’s essay, will be on the teacher for the purposes of perhaps gently tuning a few notes touched upon in the text.

ENLIGHTENMENT 2.0

I want to thank Dr. Cammarano for her thoughtful paper and then go on to state that she is right.² Previous attempts to gather enough data, to measure all the educational variables involved, have clearly failed. However, we have now achieved a technological sophistication where, with cameras, computers, heart monitors, emotion-sensing keyboards, and so on — and do not forget educational research, including that on the importance of presence — we are now able to respond to every concern raised by this essay. We can program individual learning strategies drawn from state-of-the-art brain-based and educational research that aligns with each child’s learning styles, interests, personal lives, and moment-to-moment emotional needs. Previously, we didn’t know enough or have enough equipment to respond to the truly sophisticated process of helping the young to learn, but now we do.

Picture this: it is morning and a lone student is entering the “classroom.” The room itself is no bigger than a large cubicle. There is a table in the middle upon which sits a state-of-the-art computing system. An ergonomically perfect chair, which the student designed in collaboration with the learning program during the previous educational cycle, stands before the table. The walls are completely white, hiding the fact that they actually serve as a screen, a white board, a projection system, and an interactive network all at once. The entire room, together with the accompanying “learning helmet,” is wired with a sophisticated range of sensors that track every emotional and physical nuance of the student. Even the keyboard is designed to recognize a full range of emotions.³ This “learning center,” which contains every new educational discovery, is designed to respond to the unique needs and attributes

of each student. For example, as it becomes clear that learning is enhanced when students are immersed in a natural environment, the room responds by projecting images of dense forest coupled with the sounds and smells that would be experienced there. In response to the discovery that physical activity helps the learning process, the floor of the room itself becomes an inclined treadmill, promoting the student's cardiovascular health in the way that involves least impact. In a nod towards Howard Gardner's multiple intelligences,⁴ the computer systems have kept comprehensive, lifelong records of the student, allowing them to analyze not only preferred and most successful methods of learning but also adjusting the delivery method to build on the student's strengths and work at the weaknesses, with the ultimate purpose of developing the whole person. And in response to the importance of a teacher being present to the learner, educational programmers have developed sophisticated software that, in conjunction with all the monitoring systems, allows the room to ask clear, thoughtful and "very present" questions, not only of content but also of a personal and caring nature. "Good morning, Kanwar, I see that you're a little unfocused today and that your digestive system appears overactive. Did you have enough to eat this morning?" Or "If you're getting frustrated with this trigonometry question, maybe we should stop for a while and go for a run in the forest. You're doing very well, and it will come more easily when we get back to it this afternoon." Or, again, knowing that research shows shared interest and teacher enthusiasm helps learning: "Here it comes, Rahel, the best stuff in the world. You're going to love this. It's so interesting, and you are in just the right place to get into it."

I am guessing that for those interested in teacher presence, this image has sent a *frisson* through your bodies, made your gorge rise. And so, in response, I turn to offering a few notes that might challenge and expand this concept of presence.

NOTES FOR TUNING

I teach in a semester-long intensive program with twenty undergraduate students. As a result of spending every day together and because of the thematic content that forms a narrative arc over the entire program, it is often the lives, current and future, of the students that become the real matter of the course. Thus, when, two days before this conference, an unexpected student knocked on my door and then entered preceded by a wave of sadness, coupled with the look of the sleep-deprived and distraught, I heard the call to engage and attend, to try to be present. Now, the nature of the problem is of little concern to this discussion. Suffice it to say that the student was in crisis and in need of assistance. The combination of this very real and recent example from my own experience coupled, with the need to complete, or, in this case completely rewrite, this essay led, to some rich topics for discussion with regard to teacher presence.

A. *Self-awareness*. Concurrent with the student's disclosure, an internal discussion arose for me. I actively assessed my experience and abilities with regard to the issues, emotions, and pains being expressed by the student. I also carefully assessed limits by checking in with my own energy levels and recognizing, as the discussion progressed, that there were skills needed that were beyond my

ken. I was, in a way, being simultaneously present to the student and to myself and, interestingly, in being present to myself, I was able to be better present for the student.

B \downarrow . *The Grace Note*. Over the course of our interaction, I noticed what appeared to be tiny moments of rich connection, what Martin Buber might call instances of the I-Thou.⁵ My sense of these moments is that we were each working to remain engaged but that, rather than maintain a steady state of presence, we actually rode a wave — crescendos and diminuendos of attention interrupted by quick staccato moments of presence that sounded without reason and often lasted only as long as it took to recognize their being there.

B. *The Continuum of Presence*. A semitone away from the previous observation, I want to suggest that there is a sense in Cammarano's description of presence of it being an either-or option. I was either present for my student or I was not, and the student was the same with regard to me. My sense is that, in conceptualizing presence that way, some of the subtle nuance of human interaction is lost. Just as with music, there are boundaries known as playing and not playing, but the range of playing runs from the quiet breath of a solo flute right out to the massive finale of a Tchaikovsky's Symphony No. 5. Might presence be better understood as a continuum?

C. *The Asymmetrical*. After the release of his book *I and Thou*, Buber was pushed to reconsider that relationship with respect to the interactions between teacher and student. For him, there was a sense that the teaching relationship was in fact different from that between friends; that rather than each member in the relation encountering, metaphorically holding, one another equally, often the teacher holds more of the student than the student holds of the teacher. This is not an issue of power, experience, or being able to be more present, but rather a question of how much of each individual is part of any given encounter. In meeting with my student, I found there were parts of me (for example, my anger at the perpetrator, my indecision and nervousness, my careful preparation of responses) that were not actively part of the encounter.

C \sharp . *Temporal Shifting*. Sharpening the previous note, and in response to Cammarano's focus on "now," I want to end by suggesting that, again, there may be more flexibility than seems provided. During our encounter, there were certainly moments of now, but there were also moments when I experienced myself as being more present but actively thinking both forward and backward in time. For example, as I considered my responses, I found myself deeply present while I rifled through my knowledge of this student and tried to anticipate which of my responses would do no further harm and would be heard.

I want to close by again thanking Cristina Cammarano for exploring such an important topic, and I hope my responses might assist in the project of keeping teacher presence in the lives of our students.

1. Joseph Heath, *Enlightenment 2.0* (Toronto: HarperCollins, 2014).

2. The shift to italics is to indicate a different voice.
3. It should be noted that all of this technology already exists and is being employed in various forms.
4. Howard Gardner, *Multiple Intelligences: New Horizons in Theory and Practice* (New York: Basic Books, 2006).
5. Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Ronald Smith (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958).