

Philosophical Considerations on Teacher Presence

Cristina Cammarano

Salisbury University

INTRODUCTION

Contemporary discourses about schooling and teachers are marked by a severe reductionism. Teaching has been operationalized and reduced to, in the best cases, a collection of indicators on checklists for principals, or even to merely a set of digits that should measure students' learning and thus teachers' effectiveness. Lorraine Code individuates an "instituted imaginary"¹ according to which, in Clarence Joldersma's words, teachers are viewed as "universal, interchangeable rational atoms, measurable against an impersonal standard, including guaranteed results."² A major consequence of this way of considering teachers is that individual differences are considered "deviations from the standard" and "blameworthy deficits."³ The flattening brought about by this instituted imaginary is the necessary outcome of a reductionist mistake in conceiving what it is to teach and to be a teacher.

With this essay, I want to respond philosophically to this pervasive reductionism. Reductionism consists in viewing and explaining a complex object by considering only a part of it, under the assumption that explaining this part will suffice to explain the whole. The thing analyzed is thus broken into pieces of which only a few remain to signify and indicate the whole thing. Reductionist explanations are basically the result of a logical mistake.⁴ In this essay, I individuate the idea of the teacher's *presence* as that which reveals teaching against any reductionist claim. My ambition is to inquire into the unquantifiable traits of teaching that strongly contribute to making it what it is. I offer a conceptual analysis of presence and a phenomenology of teacher presence in the classroom.

A reductionist approach to teaching indicates a belief that only some measurable outcomes and some recognizable lists of operations comprise teaching. A recent examination of skillful practice in teaching denounces "the attempt to atomize skillful practice to its barest components" as resulting from a "distortion of the observed practice."⁵ Reductionism is alluring because it promises to clarify the secret of teaching. Unfortunately, though, clarification takes the form of simplification, and it comes at the expense of the wholeness of the experience of teachers and students. The dire consequence of this approach is the loss of teaching itself, replaced by its pale phantoms, which seem to inhabit the landscape imagined by policymakers and educational reformers of this new corporate wave. Consider, for example, what is happening in charter schools owned by the company Rocketship Education. One quarter of students' time in these schools is spent in computer labs with no teachers. The company declared that it aims at increasing teacherless digital instruction to fifty percent of student learning time.⁶ When teachers' work is viewed as what is left after the reductionist assault, it may as well disappear because what makes it irreplaceable is not seen.

ASKING THE QUESTION

In response to reductionism with regard to teachers, it is important to ask anew the question about the “being” of that same teacher. What is *being a teacher*? Before even starting to engage with the question, I consider what is implied in asking a *what-is* question. Engaging with this question by searching for a definition is a radical exercise, in that it seeks to uncover the root of teaching. I subscribe to the Socratic tradition as outlined in the early dialogues by Plato. Within this tradition, terms cannot be defined once and for all. Instead, questions of definition allow for a recognition of shared and difficult perplexity, thus opening spaces for dialogue.

It is in this spirit that I consider the question, what is being a teacher? This is a question asked countless times — by the student questioning her teacher’s role (why should I listen to you?); by the parent on his way to a teacher conference (what can she or he know about my child?); by the legislator preparing a budget proposal (how many teacher jobs can I cut?). But it is also a question teachers have asked themselves and keep asking — on those mornings when rushing to the train, during those nights spent grading, over the span of lives given over to a job that is hardly ever only a job. The question about “being a teacher” also exposes the teacher’s vulnerability: it is not a neutral question, but one implicating views on the vocation, mission, and uniqueness of the person to whom it is addressed. One needs to know how to endure uncertainty in order to be able to bear this question. The question is necessary — and difficult.

The question tackles one of the basic human experiences. As with dreaming, eating, dancing, and loving, it can be safely assumed that many know the experience of teaching and of being taught. In this sense, the significance of my inquiry embraces the spectrum of basic human experiences. However, the ordinariness of the experience seems to complicate, rather than simplify, the task of understanding it. Understanding the question of “what is being a teacher?” requires a special effort also because of the perceived pervasiveness of it. If everyone teaches, in some way, how can I discern the specificity of teaching? Here, reductionism shows its allure when it proposes that the specificity can be grasped by letting go of those aspects of teaching that spurn universalization and only considering the aspects that can be quantified. How can I find and highlight that which, being present, makes teaching present, and whose absence declares the absence of teaching?

My last question brings about a shift that perhaps can provide a generative direction for my inquiry. It is a shift from thinking about the “*what is*,” the *essence* of teaching, to thinking about its *presence*. The shift is generative because it allows for the emergence of a profile that shows the “being there” of something or someone. Thinking in terms of essence, of the “what is,” felt like being in a dark room and trying to discern black cows in a black night.⁷ By changing my angle and starting to think in terms of presence instead, it felt as if something emerged from the background, something that became distinct because it separated itself from the shadowy everything else. That is what I wish to indicate with *presence*: the experience of some undeniable “being there” that manifests itself by differentiating itself from the

homogeneous dull background. *Presence* emerges through an unmistakable difference. Teacher presence, when there, cannot be denied, and it demands recognition.

PRESENCE

I want to unearth that very special way of being there that teachers are capable of: what enables a teacher at the same time to, for example, explain a grammar rule, while noticing that Annie in the third seat is not in her usual pensive mood, and while requesting attention with a gesture. The teacher is also keeping in mind that she will have to collect money for the field trip at the end of class and that the principal asked to see her after school to discuss some curriculum changes. The minute after this, that same teacher is connecting the use of that grammar rule to a particular poetry style, and she is trying to come up with an example from one of Jay-Z's songs. At the same time she is calling on Tom who has been texting during class, and, after noticing a general lack of attention, she decides to change her lesson plan and to start a group activity.

How is the teacher present in the classroom in the example I just gave? In the next section, I offer a conceptual analysis of presence. I answer the question, What is it like to be *present* to somebody or to a situation? After laying out a philosophical conception of presence, I will try to show how it takes form in the classroom from the position of the teacher.

Presence is to be here, now. It has a spatial reference (here and not there) together with a temporal one (now and only now). If the expression were grammatically acceptable, I would say that presence is out-there-ness that implies a no-no-where-ness. It is always situated. The *here* of presence is the environment that, as the context of presence, influences it and is influenced by it. In the *now*, in the time now occurring, someone comes to presence as if cut out of a background. One presents herself when she emerges out of an undifferentiated background, becoming recognizable and unique to the eyes of another. Presence is, therefore, the display of difference from a background to someone else. Presence, in fact, requires relationality: no thing is present if it is not present "to" something else. Presence requires another presence to be taken note of. Presence rises with the perception one has of the other with the body of the perceived. Bodies are part of the interplay of gaze, words, recognitions in which presence is acknowledged and made more real. Being present requires a heightened perception and response to the perceived.

Because it always calls on at least another, like an opening, presence is a task, something to be called into happening through the interaction of at least two. Presence is an undertaking and not a given. It cannot be a given because the moment in which it becomes such, it is also turned into a past. Presence cannot be closed up or concluded: its main trait is aliveness and the moment one tries to grasp it, it starts crystallizing, and it becomes something different. For this reason, a precise, geometric language would reduce presence to something it is not. While challenging the limits of language, presence lends itself to the language of metaphor, which seems to better express its living mutability and mystery.

If to be present is to take place, here and now, for another or others, then it implies responsibility. Presence cannot be accomplished fully: it is always on the edge of

not-happening given its relational and temporal dimensions; therefore, it poses itself as a task, something to work for, something to make happen due to our intentional doing. That presence implies responsibility is another sense in which presence must be undertaken intentionally. In sum, presence is marked by these traits: it is contextual, it is perceptual, it displays difference, it requires relationality, it presents itself as a task, for which it demands responsibility, and finally it displays an aliveness that is better expressed through poetic and analogic language.

PRESENCE IN THE CLASSROOM

What does “being present” look like for a teacher? In what follows, I attempt a phenomenology of presence in the classroom for the teacher. Phenomenology offers an account of “things as they appear in our experience.”⁸ A phenomenological approach entails a description of the direct experience of something in order to show its structure, especially in relation to certain problems that are neglected or misunderstood by other approaches or theories.⁹ Reductionist approaches overlook and misunderstand the being of teachers in the classroom. In response to such an erasure, adopting a phenomenological stance allows me to recover the experience of teacher presence in the classroom. The phenomenology I offer here is mediated by a school memoir, from which I take the illustrations for the points I will be making. I accept this school memoir as a rendering of an experience. In this context, I will not worry about matters of fictionality and reliability of the narrator. What matters is how the narrative illuminates the structure of the experience I am trying to seize.

If presence is contextual, because it means being *here now*, the *here* for the teacher is the classroom.¹⁰ The classroom is a separate place within a school, in which a number of students is gathered with one or more teachers while they engage in the shared collective enterprise of teaching and learning. The classroom is a multiform place where countless mediations take time incessantly and where difference and multiplicity emerge unremittingly, notwithstanding any attempts at standardization or homogenization.

In a recently published school memoir, the French writer Daniel Pennac, who has been a high school teacher for many years, offers a clear portrait of the presence of a teacher. “You can immediately tell if a teacher fully inhabits his classroom,” he writes.

Students sense it from the first minute of the school year, it is something we have all experienced: the teacher has just walked in, he is fully present, this is clear from the way he looks at his students, the way he greets them, the way he sits down, the way he takes ownership of his desk. He has not spread himself too thin, fearful of the students’ reactions; his body language is open; from the word go, he’s on the case; he is present, he can distinguish every single face, for him the class *exists*.¹¹

Pennac explains that presence is immediately known to those to whom it is opened. Full presence is brought about by *a way*: the way the teacher looks at the students, the way he greets them, and proceeds on to the minute tasks of the daily teaching routines. The way that brings about full presence demonstrates what I would like to call, with Maxine Greene, “wide-awakeness”¹²: a state of attentiveness necessary to break out of mechanical life, a state of flat conventionality in which one feels powerless and passively forced to repetitive patterns of action. A way to emancipate oneself from such a state is to simply open one’s eyes and keep them open to

the world of others. An open and unafraid way of wide-awakeness lets the teacher “distinguish every face”¹³ because he exists for the class and the class exists for him. Accepting that the teacher “exists for the class and the class exists for him” implies considering what is expressed in the preposition “for.” The teacher exists *before* the class, in front of it. But he also exists *for* them, suggesting a dedication, a commitment to paying attention to every single one of the students, of which “(s) he can distinguish every single face.” Due to this attention to and perception of individual differences, the class exists for the teacher as a response to the fact that the teacher exists for the students.

The presence of the teacher is then absolutely relational in that it only comes to be when this “for” works both ways. Philosophers of education Carole Rodgers and Miriam Raider Roth conceive of presence as an inherently relational stance.¹⁴ They describe it as a position of connection marked by mutual empathy, authenticity, and attentiveness. They also identify trust as central to a teacher’s capacity to be present to students. Interpersonal trust as revealed by the intersubjective relation of pedagogical presence engenders confidence in the student and makes the teaching and learning experience meaningful.

Consider the daily ritual of morning registration: the teacher takes the roll by calling out the name of each student. The students reply “present” — or “yes” or “here.” It has practical utility but it is also a moment in which, symbolically, a promise is renewed: that promise on which the school day is based. *I will be present for you, and you will be present for me.* Certainly, roll taking can also be a heritage of a conservative obscurantist practice — and it would be less so if at some points, the students could ask of the teacher, “and what about you, Ms. Bianchi? Are you present for us today?”¹⁵

Presence implies responsibility. Because it is not a given, it has to be taken on as a task by those involved in it. Presence as a teacher requires practice. It is to be cultivated with dedication and intentionality. Cultivating presence is a way that teachers “work on themselves,” on their capacity and outlook. David Hansen describes the many ways in which teachers can ready themselves in the face of incessant pressures¹⁶: exercises of the self that contribute to an ongoing project of self-education, that are “deliberative ways of listening, speaking, and interacting with others.”¹⁷ Like these exercises, presence needs cultivation, or else it will vanish and leave the person with the staunch performance of something that needs to be faked because it is not there. Pennac describes this eventuality with precision:

Oh the painful memory of lessons when I was not there. How I felt my students drifting away, floating off as I tried to gather my strength. That feeling of losing my class ... I am not there, they are not there, we’ve come unhitched. And yet the hour passes. I play the part of the person giving a lesson, they play the part of listeners. Our collective expression is perfectly serious, blah-blah on one side, scribbling on the other, an inspector would be satisfied: as long as the shop *looks* open ... But I am not there.¹⁸

When presence is only performance, it loses authenticity, and it is immediately perceived as such: in the classroom, the absence of the teacher allows the drifting away of students. If the teacher is not there, then the students are not there either, and what is left is just a semblance of teaching and learning. In the classroom dominated by

absence, there is a lack of attention and lack of dialogue. While the subject matter, in this case, French literature, can be still at least superficially dealt with, neither the teacher nor the students can establish a connection to it. Consequently, everyone in the classroom is made distant and detached from others and from the content. “No questions, no answers”¹⁹: there is lack of engagement, of exchange, of dialogue.

The presence of the teacher cannot be imposing. The moment it stops being dialogical, it stops being. Presence is the opposite of arrogance or egotism. Big egos take up too much room, shrinking the possibilities for the presence of others — without which no presence is possible. Presence is receptive, attentive, open. This is yet another sense in which we can understand its aliveness. This point is worth noting because the most sensible objection to recovering teacher presence comes from a stance that is preoccupied with the power imbalance related to it. The concerns would sound something like, “Is teacher presence yet another name for teacher-centeredness, that authoritarian vestige hindering learning and growth in the classroom?” Teacher presence, in this light, would consist in affirming the teacher against the student and in promoting an inflation of the teachers’ performance at the expenses of others. There is, as Doris Santoro argues, some danger in conceiving the classroom as a circle with a center and a periphery, a conception clearly evoked by metaphors of “centered-ness”, be it teacher- or child-centeredness.²⁰ Moreover, there is a real danger in promoting presence as absolute, as the solitary erection of one individual “being there.” In my view, this originates from not fully seeing that presence is, by constitution, relational and dynamic. Being present in the classroom means “getting it”: making sense of “it” — of the relation that, by connecting people and knowledge, makes them alive.

Presence is relational because it comes to be only when three poles of the relationship are dialogically connected: the students, the curriculum, and the teacher. Through this connection the principal character of presence, its temporality, acquires a sense of synchronism or contemporaneity. Contemporaneity implies that there is actual, physical presence. What I am describing here does not apply to distance learning or e-classes precisely because it presupposes that the people involved are there at the same moment in the same place. Physical synchronous presence may not be sufficient, but it is necessary.

Because presence, as being here now, is not abstract and not absolute, it cannot be possessed as a stable trait. Even if it is commonly said that someone “has got presence,” I propose that this is inaccurate because presence is not a crystallized trait owned once and for all. The only way to really acknowledge it is in the concrete situation — by seeing the present interaction with students. The temporality of presence, in the tense of contemporaneity, signifies the aliveness of the experience. It is the surprising movement that opens correspondences among those who learn and teach, and letting them correspond to each other and to what is being learned, makes them really alive.

CONCLUSION

Antonio Gramsci, a philosopher who spent most of his life imprisoned by the fascist dictatorship in twentieth-century Italy, writes in his *Prison Notebooks* that

being a teacher is a “living work.”²¹ He means by this that teachers have the work of connecting knowledge to lives and that schools have the task of keeping alive what would otherwise be dead (not only the curriculum but also the very vitality of those who are in schools). Borrowing Gramsci’s fitting expression, I consider the present teacher as always attending to her living work. A teacher present in the classroom is receptive and open, with an unimposing, humble and perceptive way.

What I have offered so far has hopefully qualified the presence of a teacher as an irreducible and unquantifiable way of being. Teacher presence cannot be measured, nor can it be tested, but it is experienced and described with clarity, when there. By recovering this concept, I wanted to respond to the reductionist attacks on teachers, attacks that are more and more common. What gets lost when teachers are viewed through this reductionist lens? Teachers without a recognized presence can become machines, functional for a certain type of institution. In some ways, being denied recognition for what makes them “attend to their living work” erases the aliveness of their being. Writing off teacher presence implies letting go of relationality, dialogue, responsibility, a fuller sense of present time, and aliveness. If what I described can be accepted, then it becomes clear that discounting teacher presence is not in the interest of our students, of our schools, nor of our communities.

1. Lorraine Code describes an “imaginary of control,” imperceptible and transparent, according to which “ready-made, easily applied categories” arrange people and the natural world in “neatly manageable array of kinds.” She advocates a “remapping of the epistemic terrain” in favor of a conceptual frame that allows for “subjective response to particularity, diversity and community.” “Particularity, Epistemic Responsibility, and the Ecological Imaginar,” *Philosophy of Education 2010*, ed. Gert Biesta (Urbana, IL: Philosophy of Education Society, 2011), 30.

2. Clarence W. Joldersma, “Who Is the Teacher? Testimony, Uniqueness, and Responsibility,” *Philosophy of Education 2010*, ed. Gert Biesta (Urbana, IL: Philosophy of Education Society, 2011)

3. *Ibid.*, 36.

4. Analytic philosopher Thomas Nagel denounces a “wave of reductionist euphoria” that produced incomplete analyses of mental phenomena and implausible accounts of the life of the mind. (“What is it like to be a bat?,” in *Mortal Questions*, Cambridge University Press, 1979), 178. He finds that most reductionist theories do not even attempt to explain an important part of the mind-body problem, namely consciousness. He noted that “to deny the reality or logical significance of what we can never describe or understand is the crudest form of cognitive dissonance” (167). The same form of crude cognitive dissonance should be felt by legislators and administrators when they try to reduce the work of teachers.

5. Derek Gottlieb, “Beyond a Rule-Following Model of Skillful Practice in Teacher Development”, *Educational Theory* 62, no. 5: 504.

6. For more on this, see Gordon Lafer, “The Last Teacher,” *The Nation*, October 13, 2014, 30–33.

7. This is an informal paraphrase of G.W.F. Hegel’s lines in the preface of *Phenomenology of Spirit*. He used the expression to indicate the difficulty but also the uselessness of conceiving the absolute without difference. I more modestly use it to indicate the inconclusiveness of efforts aiming at finding the essence of teaching within a reductionist frame.

8. David Woodruff Smith, “Phenomenology,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2013 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2013/entries/phenomenology>.

9. Tyson Lewis explains that the use of phenomenology in philosophy of education aims at things that are hidden and in plain sight, do not show themselves because they are for the most part taken for granted. Drawing upon Heidegger, he writes, “in other words, phenomenology at its root, always returns to direct experience of phenomena in order to solve certain questions.” Lewis clarifies that a phenomenological study might have the merit of examining the transparency of some questions and make it visible. “Studied

Perception and a Phenomenology of Bodily Gesturality,” *Philosophy of Education 2013*, ed. Cris Mayo, (Urbana, IL: Philosophy of Education Society, 2014), 341.

10. Here, I am not claiming that the classroom is the only possible context in which teachers operate. I am suggesting that wherever a teacher might find herself operating, that context will have some of the characteristics that I indicate as proper of the classroom, such as shared teaching and learning and mediations of differences.

11. Daniel Pennac, *School Blues*, trans. Sarah Ardizzone (London: Quercus, 2011), 107.

12. Maxine Greene, *Landscapes of Learning* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1978), 42ff.

13. Pennac, 107.

14. Carol R. Rodgers and Miriam B. Raider-Roth, “Presence in Teaching,” *Teachers and Teaching: Theory and Practice* 12, no. 3: 265–287.

15. The importance of daily greetings is described in a classroom teacher resource book, *The Morning Meeting Book*. Roxann Kriete and Carol Davis, *The Morning Meeting Book*, 2d. ed. (Turners Falls: Northeast Foundation for Children, 2002).

16. David Hansen, *The Teacher and the World: A Study of Cosmopolitanism as Education* (London: Routledge, 2011), chapters 2 and 5.

17. *Ibid.*, 41.

18. Pennac, 105–106.

19. *Ibid.*, 106.

20. Doris Santoro shows how relying on the margin-center schema is problematic because it endorses the marginalization of the teacher. She proposes that we conceptualize the classroom space as a space of dynamic ever shifting positions. “Women’s Proper Place and Student-Centered Pedagogy,” *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 27, no. 5: 313–333.

21. According to the beautiful expression by Antonio Gramsci, “In the school, the nexus between instruction and education can only be realized by the living work of the teacher.” *The Antonio Gramsci Reader: Selected Writings 1916-1935*, 3d ed. (New York: NYU Press, 2000), 313.

My colleagues Rebecca Zeldin, Richard Jochum, and Cara Furman provided valuable feedback on earlier drafts. This essay is written with gratitude towards my teachers.