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ADVICE

Waiting for Us to Notice Them

This is how we can begin to practice a 'pedagogy of presence' in our classrooms

By James M. Lang | JANUARY 19, 2015



Magoz for The Chronicle

Over the holiday season, my youngest daughter and I had the opportunity to help prepare and serve a meal at a local soup kitchen. We worked with other volunteers in assembly-line fashion to fill plates of food for hungry folks waiting in a queue that stretched around a large room and out the door.

As each plate came down the line with ham and potatoes, I plopped some salad on it, and my daughter added a piece of bread and a brownie. From there I handed the plate over a counter to a server, who gave it to the next person in line. The whole process of serving more than 200 people lasted only 45 minutes, but it was intense. With so many hungry people waiting, you wanted to get the plates filled and distributed as quickly as possible.

After 20 minutes of concentrating on my task, vaguely aware that we were doing something good but mostly focused on getting salad on the plates and keeping an eye on my 10-year-old, a man broke the invisible barrier that separated the volunteers from the recipients of our charity. "Hey, thank you," he said, speaking loudly and directly across the counter to us. "I really appreciate what you guys are doing. Without folks like you, there wouldn't be ... "

And then he trailed off, hustled along by the volunteer server and the crush of people in line behind him. I paused and stood there listening for just a moment, a clump of salad in my (sanitary-gloved) hand. A wave of something that felt like shame passed over me. This

man wanted—and deserved—more than a plate of food. He wanted to acknowledge the transaction between us: that we had prepared food for him, and that he was grateful for it.

What he wanted with his meal, I realized, was a moment of human connection. That seemed as important to him as the food. After he passed by, I made more of an effort to look up from my task and observe the people in line. And I was surprised to note how many of them were watching the volunteers, waiting to make eye contact and say a word or two of thanks. I realized how many people had passed before me already and seen nothing but the top of my head and a gloved hand.

This month I will lead a group of students at my college on a service trip to Ecuador, but we won't be handing out plates of food, building houses, or digging wells. Instead we will be engaged in what our campus ministry coordinator calls the "ministry of presence." Our job will be to meet people in neighborhoods, at hospitals and schools, and to sit with them, play games, share meals, and hear their stories. We will be present with them and focused on them. To that end, we'll be severed from our usual ties to the world: no cellphones, no Internet, no contact with our families. By choice and by constraint, we will be present with each other and with our new neighbors in the poor quarters of Guayaquil.

As I have prepared for this trip, and learned about the notion of a "ministry of presence," I recognized that I had been neglecting that dimension of service when I was handing out meals with my daughter. I was providing food but was not really present to the people in that line—at least until that man broke the barrier between us.

Ever since, I have been experimenting with trying to make myself more present to the people in my life—to my children, my spouse, and even the people I encounter every day in the coffee shop where I have spent a lot of time writing a book during my sabbatical. And while I can't prove this concretely in any way, life seems a little more joyful to me lately. We are laughing and speaking more than usual at our family dinner table. I have had a bunch of good conversations recently with people whom I once might have only greeted in passing.

And all of that, finally, has led me to reflect upon the extent to which we as faculty members should think more about the "pedagogy of presence" in higher education—about the value that comes from humans' being present with one another in teaching and learning.

Let me say upfront: This is not a screed against outcomes assessment or online education. I embrace the general swing in higher education toward articulating and measuring learning outcomes in a more coherent way, and providing access to underserved populations via online courses.

But in the past year or two, the more I read the literature on learning outcomes and online education, the more I feel that it misses something fundamental—something that can perhaps never be measured completely but that students view as essential. It's also been the clear message of books like *How College Works* (written by Daniel F. Chambliss and Christopher G. Takacs and published last year).

The message is that personal relationships are what students document as the most profound and memorable aspects of their college experience.

In order to have that powerful impact on our students, we have to be truly present in our classrooms. Are we? I began to wonder how many times in the past 15 years I had behaved in the classroom as I had in that food line—focused not on connecting with individual students but on the material, on the passing of the hour, on what was next in my day.

In that light, I have begun to reconsider my own daily teaching practices, which usually begin with the creation of a detailed outline for each class session, breaking down the hour into clearly defined segments: five-minute introduction; 10-minute writing exercise on Question A; 15 minutes of discussing their responses; 15-minute mini-lecture on a new topic, etc.

I don't question the value of making such plans, which ensure that I am thinking deliberately about how learning will happen in my classroom. But I know that sometimes I become more interested in sticking to my schedule than I am in the students in the

room.

Being more present to my students might mean letting go of my grip on my classroom schedule. If we don't get through every scrap of the material today, we'll probably get to it in the next class session. Being more present to the students probably means pausing more frequently to check on their learning, in whatever form that might take. Undoubtedly it means more than just stopping every now and then to ask, "Any questions?"

In a similar way, I know that sometimes I get so lost in the intricacies of a poem or a historical event we are covering that I might as well be up there speaking to a bunch of tape recorders. The story I am telling becomes more important to me than my listeners. How I love to describe the Irish potato famine, for example, and its devastating human consequences, to the students in my survey course on British literature. How I love to march them through my interpretation of the saturated language and rich imagery of a poem like Dylan Thomas's "Fern Hill."

Having that kind of enthusiasm for the course material isn't a bad thing. Enthusiasm in the classroom can be contagious, and of course we should love our subject matter. The problem arises when we become so engrossed in our performance that we sever our connection with the audience. Great classroom lecturers might not carry into the classroom what great actors in theater know: You are always seeking connections with the audience rather than just with the material.

Even more troublesome is the challenge of making ourselves present as instructors in online environments. I don't have any easy solutions. Heck, I'm not convinced there are easy answers for how to be more present even in face-to-face classrooms. Faculty members can be just as absent in a flipped classroom as they can in a lecture, although it seems to me that classroom structures that require frequent student-faculty interaction provide more opportunities for a pedagogy of presence than traditional teaching methods like lectures.

As a profession, I think we have to keep asking ourselves these difficult questions even if they have no easy answers: Are we handing out plates of knowledge without offering students a human connection? And while we stand up at the front talking, are students sitting out there in the seats, waiting for us to notice them and to step into their presence?

James M. Lang is director of the Center for Teaching Excellence and a professor of English at Assumption College, in Worcester, Mass. He's on sabbatical this year. His most recent book is [Cheating Lessons: Learning From Academic Dishonesty](#). Follow him on Twitter at [@LangOnCourse](#).

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