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The Transformational Teacher's Caring Presence

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Abstract

We regularly stray from honoring the centrality of our own humanity, and that of our students, in the teaching process. We become distracted by our routine tasks, preparations, meetings, tests, technological tools, and myriad other elements embedded in the teaching profession. Yet to respond to the call to teach is to accept the invitation to become an ever more Caring human being, and to communicate this ongoing Caring so that it is richly experienced by our students, especially at this point in time when stress, anxiety, confusion, and fear are at record levels among our students. To reclaim our personal sense of agency and more fully emancipate our human Caring for our students can be restorative, revolutionary, and transformational. This paper is a reflection and a call.

Keywords: teaching to transform, teacher presence, teacher immediacy, person-centered approach, dialogue-based learning

Introduction

Teaching at its highest is more than a profession: At its best, it's a life "calling" to which we respond (Buskist et al., 2005). Pursuing the art of truly transformational teaching is a lifelong endeavor we never totally master but can certainly get better at along the way as we further refine our classroom practices, and, even more importantly, ourselves.

For over a half-century now I have offered what I have considered to be person-centered (Rogers et al., 2014) and dialogue-based (Gordon, 2020) transformational courses. I currently teach courses in Interpersonal Communication, Leadership and Communication, Communication and Love, the Art of Mindful Dialogue, and Seminar in Listening, fulltime and on a highly multicultural university campus., For more than a decade prior, I served as an instructor and visiting assistant professor at over a half-dozen other colleges and universities across six states in the U.S.

In these pages I offer some of my own cumulative personal reflections and learnings, which are also consistent with a strong base of mainstream evidence-based research. For this reflective essay I ask myself: *What have I most learned about the art of effective transformational teaching across this half-century span of place and time?*

An Ethic of *Caring*

Mayeroff (1971, p. 1) offers this simple conception of *Caring*: "To care for another person, in the most significant sense, is to help them grow and actualize." A *Caring* teacher today fully recognizes that our students are under tremendous pressures and uncertainties in this contemporary era. Based upon student data obtained by the American College Health Association (2019), we can predict that during a given academic year the majority of our students are likely to feel anxious (around 66%), depressed (60%), sad (72%), lonely (67%), emotionally exhausted (85%), psychologically overwhelmed (88%), traumatized (70%), hopeless (60%), and some will be suicidal (27%). When we provide a safe classroom space for our students to speak into, we clearly hear them speak about how extremely difficult at times their lives can feel. The *Caring* teacher seeks, as did Hippocrates, to impose no further harm, but rather to

tend, comfort, nurture, support, and develop. We personify hope, and even help heal the damage inflicted by our surrounding world and encourage our students to continue forward.

Much of our development in the art of teaching is spiral in form. As Mary Catherine Bateson notes (1994, p. 31), "Spiral learning moves through complexity with partial understanding, allowing for later returns." As our learning spiral lifts and widens across time, we increasingly want to communicate our *Caring* for our students ever more authentically (hooks, 1994; Palmer, 2017; Rogers, 1995). I have come to finally realize that *Caring* is at the central core of our teaching craft (Mayeroff, 1990). *Caring* deeply not only about our subject matters, but also *Caring* about our individual students. This *Caring* is not superficial or shallow, it's full. There are levels and layers of *Caring*, and the more engrossed we become with the art of teaching the deeper our *Caring* extends to our students and our topics, and we come to outwardly emanate this inner *Caring*. As Denton (2004, p. 105) has suggested, "Resisting institutional dogma and authority, we must listen to our own hearts . . . we presence a pedagogy of feeling that restores the human contours of experience to everyday life." Our passion for our disciplinary themes, our students, and catalytic interaction between them, becomes palpably authentic, comes from deep within, and excites, invigorates, and yields positive consequences (Buckner & Frisby, 2015).

Each of us follows our own process of phenomenological progression within this art of teaching to which we have committed. I remember clearly as a graduate teaching assistant periodically standing in front of the class in a three-piece suit and tie, solely calculated to enhance my credibility and authority. That attire soon went by the wayside, but for many years was replaced by an invisible suit of psychological armor designed to continue to protect me from these "Others" whom I repeatedly had to face, and who sat in judgment of me, as I did of them. This self-protective armor mostly dissolved as decades passed, though even now occasionally an invisible shield of presumed "protection" momentarily rises and must be addressed mindfully in order to relax it, since this barrier is not in fact protective but counterproductive.

On the whole I have learned to make myself more "real" with my students, more "authentic," down-to-earth, humanly, and emotionally accessible. This, of course, means becoming more emotionally and socially vulnerable, which students often recognize and appreciate. As bell hooks (1994) expressed in *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*, "Professors must practice being vulnerable in the classroom, being wholly present in mind, body, and spirit." Movement into vulnerability is a prerequisite for creating a classroom climate of authentic sharing, daring, and *Caring*. I remember once asking a new colleague some years ago, in about the fourth week of their first semester of teaching in our program, "How's your relationship with your students going?" This colleague at first froze in place with a startled and even frightened facial display, then took a definite step backward, and finally warily asked, "Relationship?"

Making ourselves vulnerable enough to slow down, and to truly get to see and know our students is the first step in learning to *Care*. As William Blake famously observed over two centuries ago, "A fool does not see the same tree that a wise person sees." Nor does a detached, distant, and dominating teacher see the same student that a *Caring* teacher is enabled to see. De-centering from ourselves and compassionately re-centering from within the realm of students, and connecting with them, is among our continuing challenges. Slowing down and taking the time to become more fully receptive to our students, to sense who and how they are before us, and from where they might be coming, this is to begin to enter into meaningful relationship with our students (Frymier & Houser, 2010). To be here with them, to come to sense and know them, and to gather with our students in friendly and exploratory dialogue around our subject matter while *Caring* for it, them, and our process together (Palmer, 2004).

I'm aware of three guiding foundational conceptual models that provide direction in my own person-centered and dialogue-based approach to a *Caring* pedagogy. These will next be briefly summarized.

Communicating Classroom *Caring*: Guiding Models

The Person-Centered Approach

The first foundational theoretical model upon which I call in my dialogue-based coursework is the "person-centered approach" of the late eminent psychologist Carl Rogers (Rogers, 2004; Rogers & Farson, 2015; Rogers & Russell, 2002; Kirschenbaum & Henderson, 1989). Rogers famously identified three "core conditions" for creating productive, satisfying, and growth-promoting interpersonal communication: *Unconditional Positive Regard* (colloquially referred to as *Warmth*), *Empathy*, and *Genuineness.* Those of us intending to serve as person-centered facilitators of learning will benefit from consistently returning to practicing these three sets of interpersonal behaviors. We will exude a *friendliness* in which students' nervous systems can relax as we attempt to *understand* them from both our head and heart and be *genuine* and open with them. We mean no harm, we bring only goodwill; and to human organisms on a quest for safety in this 21st century world, this is appropriate and wise communication action (Kurtz & Martin, 2019; Porges, 2017). Whether we use a dialogue-based approach, a lecture-based style, or any pedagogical method, striving to create *Warmth*, *Empathy*, and *Genuineness* is worthwhile and wise (Bockmier-Sommers et al., 2017; Newman et al., 2017; Anderson & Guerrero, 1997). As we choose to do so, we are enacting "the person-centered approach" to teaching and learning, and our students will benefit (Rogers et al., 2014; Rogers & Freiberg, 1994; Rogers, 2004) from this solid and conducive foundation.

Our humane and heartfelt goodwill, when we sustain it, impacts our students' lives. With our *Warmth*, *Empathy*, and *Genuineness* we help them rise to their potential as people and learners, and this touches their hearts. They come to hold us dear. Sometimes our contribution is singular: we give them something that few others do in their world. We lift them, draw them forth, fire them up, and enable them to reach toward their best potential (Johnson & LaBelle, 2023). Students sense our passion for them as human beings, as well as for what we're teaching. With our overall *Caring* presence, we assist them to awaken to possibilities, we support the further evolution of their humanity (Virat, 2022).

We call upon our *Empathy* when we resist writing our students off when they do something other than what we would have preferred and we cut them some slack. We return to "looking again," we seek to respond helpfully rather than automatically "react" (Tausch & Hüls, 2013). We open our heart's most compassionate inner chambers and come from a place of human *Warmth*; not always perhaps, but when we can wisely manage ourselves. We seek to act out of the knowledge that our kindness heals and teaches more effectively than our harsher judgments ever could, and with far less collateral damage (Weger, 2018). We learn to gracefully give the benefit of the doubt more often, while still honoring our reasonable standards. We allow our students to bring out their best, and our best, even more of the time. We more often catch our students making progress. We learn when to be silent and when to speak. We learn to laugh; we learn to love.

Our *Caring* for our students manifests as our understanding, accepting, respecting, and prizing them, and they can see and feel this rich quality of our *Caring*. They clearly sense that we recognize and honor their personal uniqueness and immeasurability (Buber, 1970), and they feel validated and confirmed as human beings. This is something they are not necessarily getting in some (or even many) of the other contexts in which they function in daily life, including within certain other unidirectional classrooms and asynchronous online deliveries (Tausch & Hüls, 2013; Levering, 2000). But by their genuinely *Caring* transformation-oriented teachers, students are affirmed as worthwhile people who matter (Wilson et al., 2010). When we are at our best, our students receive our *Warm* friendliness and safety, our *Empathic* understanding and compassion, and our *Genuine* open presence in their lives, and we serve them well.

The WEG-VIBES Model of Dialogue

Secondly, I call upon guidelines for generative and reflective human dialogue from across the decades (Baxter, 2006; Baxter & Montgomery, 1996; Bohm, 1997; Cissna & Anderson, 1998, 1994, 1990; Goodall Jr. & Kellett, 2004; Gordon, 2024, 2006, 2000; Isaacs, 1999; Johannesen, 1971; Matson & Montagu, 1967; Poulakos, 1974).

Synthesizing previous dialogue scholarship, the recent *WEG-VIBES* model presented by Gordon (2020) includes the PCA model of *Warmth*, *Empathy*, and *Genuineness* as summarized above, plus incorporates the dialogue values and practices of *Vulnerability*, *Imagination & Improvisation*, *Being Present*, *Equality of Participation*, and *Suspending* (i.e., the relaxing of premature labels, judgments, and conclusions). As a dialogue facilitator, the teacher using the *WEG-VIBES* model attempts to repeatedly return to honoring and presencing these eight core dialogue values and practices.

The teacher first remains aware of the quality of the "safe container" at any given time, recurrently attending to the quantities and qualities of *Warmth*, *Empathy*, and *Genuineness* present as a session unfolds. The teacher also coaches students to consider finding their genuine and personal "voices" by not permanently fleeing from *Vulnerability*. Students are asked to become periodically playful and spontaneous, to be open to hearing and expressing the inspirations of *Imagination & Improvisation* and letting these more freely flow whenever possible. Students are also asked to give their undivided attention to one another and our class session itself, since *Being Present* affects the quality of our overall learning climate. There is an attempt to gently strive for balanced *Equality of Participation*, giving all students fair opportunities to find and express their voices. If certain students say too much too often, and others share little, the dialogue facilitator gracefully then draws the silent members into the unfolding dialogue with a question, or simply by inviting them into the mix. Lastly, *Suspending* has to do with the facilitator inviting class members to practice "relaxing your grip" on automatic mental labelling and premature cognitive closure on all arising content. Rather than steering toward vigorously "defending" our judgments, we lean into *Suspending* as best we are able, in our shared journey into greater inquiry (Gordon, 2020).

In a dialogue format we not only *talk with* our students, we also amply *listen to* them (Andolina & Conklin, 2021; Rogers & Farson, 2015). We create a safe space for them to discover their "voices," and allow them to practice using their "voices" to share and explore what they're thinking and feeling. With our attentive present-centered listening we bring them into the world anew: *we listen them into being*. Whether in the classroom or synchronous online, we bring our students to life; we empower them to participate, to find their voice, to be heard (Lispari, 2010; Tienken, 2020). We enable them to feel more alive and energized by the end of a class session than at its beginning. And our underlying *Caring* is clearly communicated, understood, and well-received.

The Exemplary Leadership Model

Integrational perspective is provided by the model of "exemplary leadership" offered by Kouzes & Posner (2023). Teachers who aim at fostering classroom dialogue would ideally be aware of the broad leadership practices that empirical research repeatedly demonstrates are important to trans-contextual "exemplary leadership": (1) *Modeling the Way*, (2) *Inspiring a Shared Vision*, (3) *Challenging the Process* (i.e., innovating), (4) *Enabling Others to Act*, and (5) *Encouraging the Heart*. The teacher who hopes to foster class dialogue will themselves need to exhibit the *WEG-VIBES* practices in action, and therefore *Model the Way*. Valuing and enacting these practices becomes a key part of the *Shared Vision* that gets inspired in the dialogic learning community. To be offering a dialogue-based student course is to already be *Challenging the Process*. And by empowering students to speak, self-disclose, and share their voices and stories with others in class, the dialogue-based teacher regularly *Enables Others to Act.* Lastly*, Encouraging the Heart* is transpiring within the "safe container" of the dialogue context permeated by an ongoing tone and texture of *Warmth, Empathy,* and *Genuineness*. Having this efficient and integrative leadership model at hand to accompany the overall *WEG-VIBES* dialogue model (which itself subsumes the PCA model) can provide further overall useful conceptual clarity and direction for the transformational teacher.

Communicating *Caring* in the Physical Classroom

I have been asked to provide direct personal examples of what it means in actual practice to communicate *Caring* to our students in a person-centered and dialogue-based setting and will now attempt to give some flavor of this approach.

Throughout my teaching career, whenever room architecture and chair re-arrangement would permit, I have had my classes sit in a circular format. This has been so that we all have visual access to one another, feel seen, and share space equally within our circle. Since my classes are never unidirectional lectures delivered from a podium, and since I am seeking active student participation, equality, and engagement, the circle format has worked well. More important than its facilitative spatial configuration is what the circle communicates to the students: "You all have an equal seat at our transparent 'table,' and our communication can be multi-directional. I the teacher stand not above you, all eyes straight ahead on me, but sit with you at the same level, ready to engage our subject matter with you, all of us together in our learning community." Keltner (2016) has shown that operating from within an elevated "power" position often leads to empathy deficits and self-serving impulsivity, incivility, and disrespect; conversely, research indicates that "true" power (i.e., influence) results from extending empathy, showing gratitude, and sharing personal stories that unite. Minimizing explicit power divisions can be advantageous to the smooth functioning and well-being of a learning community.

Most frequently three books are used in each of my classes, and each week one chapter from each of our three books is assigned to be read by all students in preparation for our dialogue-based two hour and forty-five-minute session. At the session itself I will typically welcome each of our class members by first name as they join our circle and will often engage in small talk and friendly banter ("phatic communion") with individual students as we begin to settle-in for our session. Any spontaneous humor that arises is usually welcomed, and is helpful in relaxing moods, minds, and bodies (Appleby, 2018; Segrist & Hupp, 2015; Wanzer et al., 2006).

After preliminary class housekeeping, I will typically begin a session by asking students if they have had any personal experiences with any of our class topics and themes from our previous week's session. Did our subject matters intersect with their lives in any way, and if so, when and how? We usually go for ten to fifteen minutes or so of this preliminary voluntary sharing, re-instantiating our prior week's themes. Then a transition is made into our current session's topics. I will typically ask something like: "Who wants to start us off now in one of our chapters for this session, and what you found there that caught your attention, and energized you in some way?" Other times the phrasing might be about like this: "What caught hold of your attention and wouldn't let go?" or "Tell us about something in this chapter that has significant meaning for you" or "What in this chapter could you definitely learn from, and maybe use in some way?" or "What in this reading gave you added insight?" or "Was anything in this chapter written in such a way as to really stand out to you?" If no one responds within about a half-minute to this invitation, I'll call on someone by their first name, and we begin.

On occasion I will tell classes that we are going to be experimenting with accepting silences as they arise and having them be "okay" even if they feel awkward. We will let our contributions emerge naturally from these silences, rather than forcing ourselves to break them. This relaxation into silences slows a session down considerably and is not our consistent practice in my classes since there are course materials with which to engage; but periodically, they are worthwhile in altering the rhythm of a session.

We as transformational-oriented dialogue-based teachers rise above a limiting conception of our role as primarily "information transmitters" and, when we're able, also offer our humanity and personhood in our more ancient role as "wise elders" (Ferrari & Kim, 2019). We know that education at its best is not about just pouring in more information, it's about setting and stoking inner fires of curiosity, wonder, and discovery. It's not primarily about cramming-in, it's about teasing-out and facilitating synergistic exploration, creation, and reflection (Schwartz & Sharpe, 2019).

Rather than student passivity, wiser education is about eliciting student generativity. In a dialogue-based class we are asking students to not only exchange (trade) thoughts, but to discover more energetically what it means to in fact be "thinking together" such that the "whole" often does in fact become greater than the sum of its parts (Isaacs, 1999, Part. I). Dialogue is "shared inquiry" into a theme region, and within a "safe container" created and sustained by its participants. We at times share aspects of our histories and imperfections and allow our common humanness to be felt. Self-disclosure is inevitable, desirable, and useful in building classroom connection and intimacy ("in-to-me-see"). As much as reasonably possible, the dialogue-based educator will be emulating dialogue values and practices

of *Warmth*, *Empathy*, *Genuineness*, *Vulnerability*, *Imagination & Improvisation*, *Being Present*, *Equality of Participation*, and *Suspending.* The teacher gives hope that these are attainable for all. The teacher who attempts to facilitate classroom dialogue is a vital component in the process of catalyzing "shared positivity resonance" (Fredrickson, 2014) and productive dialogical pursuit.

A substantial body of quantitative "teacher immediacy" research has for decades made it clear that when we sincerely smile and laugh with our students, let our friendliness and enthusiasm show, use our students' names, chat with our students and learn about them, share our personal stories together, interact more and lecture less, validate our students with verbal and nonverbal praise and encouragement, make warm eye contact and use a supportive tone of voice, that we are creating a positive and nurturing learning atmosphere (e.g., Baringer & McCroskey, 2000; Frisby & Martin, 2010; Wilson & Ryan, 2013; Wilson et al., 2010). The teacher's caring, friendly, and supportive presence contributes measurably and significantly to student motivation and persistence, affective learning, cognitive learning, overall student satisfaction, and the creation of a transformational learning environment (Liu, 2021; Madigan & Kim, 2021; Mazer, 2013; Segrist & Hupp, 2015; Cornelius-White & Harbaugh, 2010).

These outcomes are fostered within a person-centered and dialogue-based approach, and the facilitator attempts to set the tone and tempo for this to occur. Interweaving course materials, students, and teacher is a primary challenge, striving to harmoniously bring these components into confluence. This entails dialoguing over subject matter instead of the instructor endlessly lecturing about it and providing multiple opportunities for students to find and exercise their voices rather than having them suppressed. This past week in class a student said that he metaphorically thinks of me as a "gardener" tending our class members, our subject matter, and the soil of our learning environment. This was synchronistic with my saying to my wife earlier that very same day, as she was working in her garden right beside where I was preparing for class, that she and I were doing the same work: tending carefully to creating a good foundation within which growth can occur, and then be nurtured toward its maximum.

Communicating *Caring* in the Synchronous Online Medium

For just over three years now my courses have not been offered in the physical classroom (originally due to Covid-19), but instead as synchronous live sessions on Zoom, one evening per week per course, with those sessions lasting nearly three hours (including a twenty-minute break in the middle). Surprisingly, the transition to the electronic channel for creating a dialogue-based learning community (with no dark screens) has worked incredibly well.

As for the person-centered "safe container" elements of *Warmth*, *Empathy*, and *Genuineness*, we continue to do quite well even within the online delivery medium. This is more possible than I would have imagined; it would be fair to say that the transfer to the synchronous medium has been successfully made (Motschnig-Pitrik, 2005). As always, students are reminded of the importance of our foundational core interpersonal communication practices of *Warmth*, *Empathy*, and *Genuineness* (the "*Big 3*" as I often refer to them in class), and these core conditions are periodically publicly reflected upon as to their operation within our learning community.

Session agenda and procedure has been the same as in the physical classroom: Students and professor gather around our assigned core readings and engage in human dialogue in response to them, while surrounded by a supportive psychological-emotional container. My role is to keep the dialogue moving, and to paraphrase what I am hearing some students share to make it clearer for myself and others. I also at times ask questions of clarification to tease-forth more complete responses, giving students practice in developing their thoughts.

In each session two or three Zoom breakout rooms will also be used, typically with four to five students per room. These breakouts allow for structural variety, greater personal connection, and enable the quieter students to speak more comfortably. Each breakout period is followed by a return to our larger group and a processing of some of what arose in our breakout rooms. The facilitator simultaneously monitors the clock, our rate of progress with course materials, equality of class participation, and overall presence of psychological comfort and safety.

Students are asked to be self-aware as to what they might be doing not only with their words, but also with their own bodies as they listen to others speak, including becoming aware at times of their supportive or non-supportive facial behaviors (their smiling, frowning, laughing, eye contact with screen); the presence or absence of their head nodding; their supportive or non-supportive tones of voice as they speak; and their sustained attention to each other and our themes of the session (Burgoon et al., 2021; Knapp et al., 2013).

These suggestions are shared with students in an effort to remind them that they "cannot *not* behave," that everything they are non-mindfully doing with their bodies can be construed by various others as having message value and constituting "communication." Students are simply advised to become self-aware at random moments, knowing that not only are they perceivers of others' nonverbal behaviors but that they too are unconsciously "giving off" stimuli that can be perceived and interpreted by those others. To become ever more self-aware of the quality and tone of our personal presence is to increasingly assume responsibility for contributing to a supportive learning atmosphere. Dark screens are permitted only in exceptional circumstances and are not our norm.

We practice manifesting *Warmth*, its safe and friendly elements, in our electronic classroom, including acceptance, respect, and prizing. We seek to bring *Empathy* from our minds and hearts, and to let our *Genuineness* be felt, especially as accompanied by our *Warmth* and *Empathy*. And we are encouraged to dare to risk vulnerability at moments; to yield to improvisational discourse emerging from our own mouths; to be highly attentive and present, to give everyone the opportunity to be heard; and to practice suspending premature attachment to firm judgments (the *VIBES* elements of our dialogue model). To this we aspire. Our class is framed as a learning laboratory, a place to mindfully practice putting into action what we study as we study it, moving from knowledge "about" to knowledge "of," and within a high-quality learning environment.

When I look at my computer screen and the frames where the students can be seen, I mentally, imaginatively, psychologically, and affectively "project" myself into their space, into their location. My mindset is to "enter" my students' worlds, their realms, to transcend the limitations of the plastic screen and create felt connections in a spirit of *Warmth* and *Empathy.* I want to see them and be with them and make this my operative mindset.

The students spend the majority of our class time sharing their responses to our class readings. I will also share messages and lines from our readings to which I personally am drawn but will typically do this in three minutes or less, so as not to crowd out student contributors from equal and open access to our dialogue. I attempt to give most such comments with an air of "to-me-ness," and not as final pronouncements of Truth. The purpose of our dialogues is not to reach pre-determined conclusions, but to have the experience of exploring our subject matter together. We stimulate curiosity, wonder, speculation, imagination, and application.

Creating opening and/or closing class rituals can also help in providing a sense of meaning and class unity. When in the physical classroom at the end of each session we would regularly stand up in our circle, join hands, and share silence for a half-minute or so. Next, we would huddle together in the center and stack up our hands, much as an athletic team might do. I would count "One, two, three!" and we would solidly yell out our course title together: "Interpersonal!" or "Dialogue!" or "Leadership!" or "Love," or "Listening!" This activity loses much in translation here, but in person it invariably had an energizing and bonding effect, and sent us off on a strong note, and smiling and laughing (often the shortest distance between hearts).

Synchronous online classes render impossible this former closing ritual, but an equally worthwhile substitute closing ritual has emerged just this semester. Again, much will get lost in translation here, but this risk will be taken. After our substantive session has drawn to a close, I ask everyone to unmute themselves, and then remind them, tongue-in-cheek, that it is now time for our closing "meditation." I count "One, two, three!" and then we all, each in our own location and with our camera and microphone on, throw our hands up into the air, extended above our heads as if in a victory pose, and loudly utter the sound "*Wheee!*" We repeat this routine for a total of three such utterings and full arm extensions. We are inevitably laughing together at this point, and camaraderie is in the air. Then

folks wave to each other, smiling, and log off, and I leave last. Again, this mini-ritual might not sound like much in words on a screen, but in actual practice it has much to commend it.

I also take the time to write a personalized class message each week along with the sending of each course's Zoom link, rather than having these sent automatically. These personalized class messages are casual, friendly, and usually humorous and motivational in intent, and remind students of exactly which chapters we will be dialoguing around at our next session. This personalization of our link-sending adds a total of at least three extra days of work to my semester, but it feels important to do it this way to keep our communication fresh and human.

Periodically other separate messages will also be sent to individual classes, suggesting concepts and themes from our prior week's session to perhaps be aware of and reflect upon as they continue on into the rest of their week. This is an attempt to help sustain student motivation and class connection.

What have been the downsides of our synchronous online connection? Roommate and family and pet or other distractions; signal difficulties; absence of physical proximity and touch; absence of in-person mutual eye contact; disruption of a natural dialogue flow and rhythm due to the closing and opening of microphones. Upsides? No moving of class furniture; no bright fluorescent classroom lights; convenience of class access from our residences; and course and instructor evaluations by students that are superior to prior in-classroom years.

End-of-semester global student evaluations for both Course and Instructor across a two-and-a-half-year period were both significantly higher ($p < .01$) in the synchronous Zoom medium than for my classes previously held in physical classrooms on our campus. Sixty percent of these courses (nine of fifteen classes) received perfect 5.0 course and 5.0 instructor scores, and with high rates of response averaging sixty-four percent, and none below fifty percent, per class (Gordon, 2023).

A content analysis of the qualitative open-ended student responses across the most recently completed academic year yielded the following six qualities of the professor that were perceived as especially "helpful" to students: *empathic understanding; caring; positivity; kindness; knowledge; and the facilitation of a safe and comfortable learning atmosphere*.

I do not socialize with my students outside of class or off-campus and am not their social "friend" in that sense; yet I do feel as very much their wise elder "friend" within our class experience, and outside it by electronic connection. I also let my students know that I am thinking about them and our topic between our class sessions, and that each course is a unique and singular phenomenon, never again to be repeated with exactly this cast of characters, and that they, my students, are truly highly meaningful in my life. I choose to be referred to as "dr. g" by my students rather than by my first name alone, or my title and last name.

Our 21st Century Students Need *Caring*

My students are down-to-earth people leading real lives, and not always easy ones. It feels satisfying to "be there" for them. Today as I write these words, for instance, I receive an email from an older female student who is currently in the hospital and needing an unexpected surgery. She writes she will not attend class this week. I write back in a spirit of compassion and supportiveness, and we exchange four or five rounds of emails, leaving me confident she knows I care about her well-being. This is an inspiring student who at one time was addicted to alcohol and drugs and has now been clean for many years and is employed as a certified substance abuse counselor.

Two days ago, I had a male student shedding tears during class, he was so happy to have found his way to the two courses we have together this semester. He has had a rough past, including a failed marriage and an ex-wife who has a restraining order in place against him that stipulates he cannot see his teenage son for another five years (in large part related to dad's past lack of adequate anger-management skills). I let him know that I clearly see his desire to get unstuck from a checkered past and grow as a human being and continue to commend him for his willingness to create a healthier future. This was an attempt to communicate caring and have this student *experience* this caring.

As do most of us, I have other students who are working full time in addition to taking a full college load, and periodically fading under the strain. Others are student-athletes and working both sides

of that equation. Many other students are in romantic, family, friend, or work relationships that are troubled and turbulent. And, again, two-thirds of our students are attempting to cope with anxiety and spells of depression. This is commonplace reality for many of us teaching in an era of speed and noise, division, distortion, danger, and the stresses that so frequently result.

These are real people in our classes and living daily lives of challenge and difficulty. The more we can shine our light of *Warmth*, *Empathy*, and *Genuineness* their direction, as we all together inquire into our course subject matter, the less pain their suffering causes and the more their resilience is stoked (Floyd, 2019). As William Miller (2017, p. 51) has wisely expressed it, "There is in particular an odd belief, never supported by science, that if we can just make people feel bad enough about themselves, then they will change. If anything, the opposite is true: that when we feel unacceptable, we are unable to change. Shame and humiliation are paralyzing." As *Caring* transformative teachers we avoid doing further harm, we bring pause to our students' pain, and arouse their hopes for self-restoration and further unfoldment.

Conclusion

There's so much more to being a transformational teacher than meets the eye. The longer we teach, the more we realize how much there is to the art and craft of meaningfully expanding other human beings' wise perspectives and practices, and how it is not primarily about staying emotionally aloof and conveying bits of information (Frymier & Houser, 2010). It is about people communicating, and ideally communing, with each other at levels of mind, heart, and spirit. What a beautiful and time-honored profession this is, and how very much potential it holds not only for the growth of our students, but for ourselves, as teachers and human beings. As Mayeroff (1990, p. 54) long ago observed, "We are 'in place' in the world through having our lives ordered by inclusive caring."

It is so easy to get distracted by our syllabi, our lesson plans, our content objectives, our technological tools, etc., but the key element in the overall student experience is *Us*: Our *Warmth*, our *Empathy* and compassion, our *Genuineness* as a human being. When we bring the *best* of our own humanity to our classroom teaching, transformations can occur (McKenna & Rooney, 2019). This of course requires ongoing inner work, self-care, self-reflection, emotional and social intelligence, maturity, wisdom, resilience, and our own continuing development as a person and a professional across time.

What a formidable challenge, and grand opportunity, we have chosen by saying "*Yes*" to our call to teach in this lifetime.

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