
THE PRESENCE OF RELATION

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By way of introducing the articles in this journal, I want to make the untenable case that they all say the same thing. Each article makes the same point. What's more, the same thing they all say is a very old thing. What is this thing they all say? This thing does have something to do with educational relation, which makes good sense since the theme of this issue of *Philosophical Studies in Education* is 'Education and Relation.' But more specifically, this same thing that they all say is that educational relation should take the form of a *presence*. That is, not only must there be relations in education, but these relations must bring people face to face. This is truly an old thing to say, given the postmodern discrediting of presence that has taken place over the past four decades. The metaphysics of presence has been rightfully discredited. But not by our authors, it seems. Postmodern thought has pointed out the tyranny of insisting that truth resides in proximity, the tyranny of epistemological clarity, of seeing 'the truth' with one's own eyes, of having to be face-to-face with the other. But our authors especially enjoy the last of these tyrannies.

Of course, I am not trying to say that each of the articles you will read says the same thing about presence, or that they say it in the same way. That is where the interest of these writings lies: in the various perspectives that our authors bring to bear on the issue of presence. I have found it fascinating to honor each of these perspectives, to honor the unabashed 'group hug' mentality of these articles, even if this mentality seems a bit old fashioned. As I will intimate at the end of this introduction, there is actually a sense in which these various perspectives on presence actually problematize the postmodern assumption that presence is tyrannical. Ultimately, what these readings teach us is that something old fashioned may no longer be old fashioned. Pardon me? Yes, if a thing can become old enough, it can sometimes become old no longer. It can become new again. Honor the perspectives of these articles with me, and you will find that presence is rather new after all.

In this journal's first article, "Relational Economies of Schooling," Alexander Sidorkin returns to his Marxist roots. In this written rendition of his Presidential Address, Sidorkin argues that schools must be seen as sites of commodity exchange. Students work and donate their labor; teachers and administrators offer rewards (albeit non-monetary) in the form of grades and advancements. As Sidorkin puts it, "It just struck me one day..." that we might think of "academic work as a form of labor." Indeed, "Schoolwork is really a chore performed by students rather than a service provided to them, because the economic benefits of students' efforts are enjoyed mostly by their future employers." His point here is aimed squarely at the bad faith entailed when

mass schooling offers the promise of social mobility to a whole population of students/workers. It is a false promise, notes Sidorkin, one that is an opiate for the masses.

Rather, we must think about schools in much the same way that structuralist anthropologists have thought about social organizations. “Economically speaking,” writes Sidorkin, “regular American public schools are much closer to tribes of the Pacific described by Malinowski than to corporations located nearby. Their economic relations are embedded in other social relations.” Thus we should focus on the relations of schooling rather than the false promise of social mobility. We should do something akin to what labor unions were trying to do throughout the twentieth century: “They did not want to dismantle the working class by promoting individual social mobility; rather, they sought to elevate the conditions of working class people as a whole, to find [a] more meaningful mode of existence for the entire group.” That more meaningful mode of existence must be based on relations, on the presence of people with each other in schools. Such relational presence is much more humane, much more practical even, than the abstract and unreliable promise of social mobility for all.

For readers who know the work of Cris Mayo, there is a curiously presentist orientation to her essay, “Shifting Relations: Multiculturalism and the Problem of Identity.” Elsewhere, Mayo is often concerned with the particularly *intrapersonal* aspects of identity negotiations, with the uncanny, with the importance of granting distance to the other rather than the insistence on getting close. Yet in this essay, Mayo is all about the importance of dancing with the other, quite literally: “The situation I describe involves pre-service teacher elementary education students working and playing with Latina/o school students (mostly elementary students, but also middle and high school students).” Mayo’s students were preparing for, and participating in, a dance routine to be staged for the Latin American Community Center. Mayo’s point? That there are times to talk and then there are times to *be with*. When it comes to education on multiculturalism, on power imbalance, on inequity, there is an over-emphasis on classroom representation, on classroom dialogue. There is a discursive over-emphasis on feeling and speech that leaves us (ironically) tongue-tied and feeling-tied. There is a point when students should stop talking and *just dance*. You may understand the uncanny, but can you dance?

Yes, this entire journal might be construed as a modernist apologia. Sort of. Certainly, Jaylyne Hutchinson and David Mackey want to hearken back to some tried and true metanarratives. For Hutchinson, it’s a yearning for communities that resemble “a small town in Mexico with the colors and clothing of the people, the time, the stories.” For Mackey, it’s an advocacy of Protestant

Neo-Orthodoxy as a grounds for educational work that fosters social justice. Back to small communities, back to religion, back to presence with others.

Actually, ‘back to’ is only half the story. Drawing on Esteva and Prakash’s *Grassroots postmodernism: Remaking the soil of cultures*, Hutchinson points out that the community of presence established by folks who choose not to partake in the de-spiriting individualism of late capitalism is, in fact, a radically postmodern community. It is a community of people who refuse to be commodified in the way that “public” education is currently being commodified. Commodification and alienation are, Hutchinson reminds us, rife in the modernist project of education. Democratic relations of presence are thus quintessentially *postmodern*. We must look to examples of people who *do* have community if our education is ever to be truly *public*. We must look not ‘back to,’ but ‘forward to’ the practice of *comida* in education, a practice that “is profoundly social and connects land, people and time.” It is, I believe, in the same spirit that David Mackey’s “Protestant Neo-orthodoxy” looks not ‘back to’ but ‘forward to’ Protestantism as a grounding for social justice.

Reading the work of Bill Fridley, Ron Zigler, and Awad Ibrahim, one moves from a focus on social justice to an emphasis on the matter of presence and its connection to absence. Indeed, Fridley, Zigler, and Ibrahim are concerned with the way presence might overflow its own boundaries in order to reconfigure how one lives one’s life. For Fridley, there is the presence of ‘reality’—what really is—but there is also an annexed presence that he calls self-deception. Fridley makes the case that educators should pay close attention to the ways that self-deception might enhance human flourishing, and, as a correlate, how it might enhance the educational experiences. So there is life as we know it, then there is life as we conceive of it in order to maintain psychic health. Wouldn’t it be wonderful if students could activate, for themselves, the healthy aspects of self-deception so often activated by the most robust of people? Not too far from Fridley’s conception of healthy self-deception is Zigler’s notion of self-transcendence. Borrowing largely from Aldous Huxley, Zigler makes the useful case that education worth its name must enable students to attain “deafferentation.” Students should be encouraged to become more fully present, even if we must legally stop short of advocating the use of hallucinogens for them to become so.

Ibrahim makes an impressive contribution to the racialized aspects of presence’s surplus. In his “One is Not Born Black,” he reminds us of the ways in which United States hip-hop culture has applied leverage to the black identity of youth in Toronto. The presence of blackness, for these youths, is, ironically, garnered from an absence, from a scene alien to the present. And Ibrahim deepens this notion of surplus presence by recounting his own experience of ‘becoming black’ as an immigrant to Canada. Becoming black at the moment of being

interrogated by a policeman on the street, Ibrahim reminds us that “in North America, my Black body speaks a language of its own, it cheats me, it ritualizes me.” One is ‘present’ as a black man in North America only insofar as cultural discourses and brutally racist presumptions *present* one as present. Presence often comes with an annex.

In their essays on Nel Noddings and John Dewey, Kathleen Knight-Abowitz and Joe Watras address a conundrum of educational presence that may well continue to plague educators for as long as there are formal institutions of education. Namely, if educators encourage presence and relation in the context of the school, how can they be sure that such practices will spill over into the demos? How can one be sure that caring for close others in school will lead to political engagement after students have gone on to the not-so-communal life of adulthood? Knight-Abowitz has read Noddings’s recent work, *Starting at Home: Caring and Social Policy*, and has concluded that Noddings fails to offer an answer to this question. In a similar vein, Watras reads Noddings’s *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics*, and Dewey’s *Democracy and Education*, noting that “both books suffer from similar shortcomings. Noddings never mentioned social transformations... [and] Dewey did not discuss the ways that power relations could instigate or block social transformations.” In short, relations of presence in schools do guarantee overall social change. Private presence is a good thing, but it doesn’t promise much in public. A point worth remembering.

To go back to the matter of tyranny, one might note the tendency of group-hugging presence to silence people, to make them conform. In other words, when people get together, some of them won’t feel as together as others. This is the problem that Sarah McGough and Andrew McKnight address. McGough focuses on dialogue between students of different races. She is a staunch proponent of such dialogue, such presence, but she argues that such dialogue won’t happen unless students attain a set of “flexible habits” that allow them to respond in unexpected, unscripted ways. McKnight, for his part, looks to the sorts of emotional wherewithal necessary for dialogue and presence. He focuses primarily on the emotionally charged dialogue that occurs among teachers and school administrators as they attempt to work well together under depersonalizing, de-presencing mandates of public educational policy. Drawing on Nietzsche for inspiration—indeed a great place for inspiration when it comes to negotiating emotional well-being—McKnight suggests that “interpersonal conflicts might then become spaces for rationally reflective distance, self-reflective intimacy, and dialectically reparative action.” Some say presence entails tyranny because it wounds. These two essays remind us that whatever presence doesn’t kill us makes us stronger.

Rounding out this journal’s content, you will read two critiques of the current accountability movement in North American education. Both lament

the loss of human presence that comes from accountability's insistence on numerical equivalences, and accountability's disregard of human meaning. As Linda O'Neill points out, using the work of Hans-Georg Gadamer as a referent, there is a "degeneration of the concept of practice." Practice entails human adjudication based on the presence of people. Such presence, presence that would employ wisdom and dialogue instead of steely numbers, is all but gone from the current push toward "scientifically based research." With this critique of accountability, Angela Hurley seems in complete agreement. "Reducing learners to numerals," she reminds us, "dehumanizes them, resulting in unfortunate educational practices." Current accountability measures alienate; they de-presence people.

In closing, I want to go back to Jaylyne Hutchinson's notion of "grassroots postmodernism." Because, I think that if these essays teach us anything, they teach us that there is something enjoyable, and perhaps not so modernist after all, in the tyranny of presence. We are at a moment in education when students and educators are being asked, in the name of upward mobility, of multiculturalism, of rational selfhood, of accountability, to become distant from each other as *people*. As Hutchinson points out, we may live under 'the postmodern condition,' but this distance, this lack of presence, creates a quintessentially *modern* sort of alienation. At such a moment, we are called to reconsider the tyranny of not-being-present before we smugly dismiss the tyranny of presence. At such a moment, group hugs are not so bad, are maybe even a bit postmodern, after all.
