

Embodiment and Narrative: Practices for Enlivening Teaching

Joshua Searle-White, Ph.D., Dan Crozier, M.F.A.
Allegheny College

Authors' Contact Information

Joshua Searle-White, Ph.D.
Associate Professor and Chair
Department of Psychology
Allegheny College
Meadville, PA 16335
Tel: 814 332-2706
email: jsearle@allegheny.edu

Dan Crozier, M.F.A.
Associate Professor and Chair
Department of Communication Arts and Theatre
Allegheny College
Meadville, PA 16335
Tel: 814 332-4386
email: dcrozier@allegheny.edu

Abstract:

Both beginning and seasoned instructors experience times when their teaching feels difficult, tiring, or flat. How can we bring more life into our teaching during those times? This article argues that exploring the dynamics of the classroom situation can increase both the effectiveness and enjoyment of teaching. In particular, we suggest that increasing awareness of breathing, physicality, and the narrative elements of teaching can create more authentic relationships with students.

Key Words:

Teaching; professional development; embodiment; storytelling; teaching effectiveness.

Introduction

On some days, teaching in a college or university setting is a lot of fun. Eager and intelligent students await our every word. We get to teach material that we find important, exciting, and intellectually challenging. We might even see the students grapple with complex ideas and give voice to sound or innovative conclusions.

Yet other days, it is much more difficult. Maybe we are teaching Calculus or Introductory French for the 10th or 20th time, and it is feeling a little tedious. Or the students look at us with vacant faces, as though they are bored, confused, or just plain asleep. At times like that, it can seem to everyone involved that the class period will never end.

How can we keep our teaching alive and engaged in these moments? Most college and university faculty would probably say that keeping current in our fields is the first step. Indeed, many of us tinker, update, and revise our class material often (even constantly) to do just that. However, there are many dimensions of classroom interaction beyond the content of the course. In this article we will argue that bringing awareness to our habits and to the possibilities for change that lie within those areas, can bring new energy, spontaneity, and enjoyment into our teaching. We will focus on (1) our physical experience and presence in the classroom (embodiment) and (2) the ways in which teaching is like storytelling (narrative). More attention to these elements of the classroom experience can bring new aliveness into the experience for both us and the students.

Our assertions here are based on two sources. First, we come to this work separately from our experiences in theatre and storytelling, and there are longstanding strands of academic and practical thought in those fields which provide the intellectual basis for our suggestions. Second, over the past several years we have been conducting experiential workshops with faculty based on these ideas. We will draw on particular experiences that faculty members have had during these workshops as illustrations throughout this article.

Our ultimate goal is to create possibilities for more freedom and more spontaneity in teaching. If our classroom lives are more exciting (to us) and more satisfying, that helps us be more energized and ready to do our work. That, in turn, makes for a better environment for both us and our students.

Assumptions

Embedded in our approach are four assumptions. First and foremost, we believe that establishing a relationship with the students is central to good classroom teaching. By "relationship," we mean an alive connection in which the teacher and the students both affect what happens during class. Note that we are not talking about a relationship outside of class or one that ignores the important status and role differences between teachers and students. We are talking about the in-the-moment process between the teacher and the students, whether the interaction is in a small seminar or in a lecture room with 500 or more students. Each participant in that interaction must at some level be open to being influenced by the other.

Second, we believe that we as teachers limit the extent to which we engage in such a classroom relationship because of the vulnerability that relationship necessarily entails (see Palmer, 1998, p. 37, for a discussion). Ways of limiting relationship in the classroom include holding rigidly to an agenda or plan even when it is not working, trying to portray oneself as knowledgeable or confident or friendly, or even abandoning content in favor of a more comfortable interaction with students. Many of the ways we limit relationship come out of habit. For that reason, becoming more aware of habits is a central part of the practices we recommend.

Third, we believe that faculty (in fact, all human beings) have many more capacities for communication than we are aware of. We use our eyes and our voices to communicate with others, to be sure. However, there are other subtle qualities of communication that we use even without knowing it. For example, we can sense tension in a room when we enter it, just by feeling the quality of the silence. We can become more aware of those capacities through greater consciousness of our physicality, and with practice, we can develop these levels of awareness and use them in class to enhance our teaching. The more we gain awareness of those capacities, the more choices and spontaneity we will have in our daily work.

Finally, we believe, based on our work with faculty, that many (or even most) people will initially experience resistance to the ideas that we put forth here because they challenge longstanding habits and encourage facing the uncertainty of new ways of being in the classroom. We view such resistance as normal and even useful. Without resistance, how will we know when we are encountering an idea or a feeling with which we are not comfortable? Growth and change often come from finding areas we find uncomfortable in and staying with them long enough to see what we are resisting. Resistance is a very good teacher, as long as we do not let it rule us.

Our intent

One final note before we delve into the details: What we propose here are not techniques. Instead, they are practices that we hope will help every instructor, whether in the natural sciences, social sciences, or humanities, develop a greater sense of awareness and presence in the classroom. We do not privilege any particular mode (e.g., lecture or discussion) or style of teaching over any other. Instead, we believe that teaching is working best when both the students and the instructor look at their watches when the bell rings and say, "Class is over already? Where did the time go?" We hope that the practices we offer here will help faculty have more of those experiences.

Embodiment

The first major theme is bringing more awareness to the way we inhabit our bodies when we are in the classroom. When students experience a professor in class, they have access not only to the professor's words; they also can see the professor, hear the qualities of her or his voice, notice the pace of the professor's breathing, experience the relaxation or tension in the professor's body, and observe how close or how far the professor is from the students. If the students can observe all of that, wouldn't it make sense for us to know what we are conveying?

Breathing

It seems obvious that words are the professor's primary tools. Yet all of our speech depends on breathing, so much so that most books on vocal technique start with extensive discussions of the relationship between breathing and voice (see, for example, Jones, 2005; Lessac, 1996; and Rodenburg, 1992). But breathing is not simple. When babies breathe, their whole torsos move. However, as we mature, we tend to breathe more shallowly. Sometimes we hold our stomachs in because we want to look thin, or we learn as teens to control our breathing as a way to control our emotions and be cool. When we are tense, we deny ourselves complete breaths, as if we are afraid to accept what might happen. On the other hand, when we relax with someone and feel at ease, we breathe fully and easily.

In this way, breathing can be a useful metaphor for teaching. We cannot act on the world (breathing out) without first taking it in (breathing in). Both acts are equally important. More concretely, we can think of the relationship between us and the students as being mirrored in our breathing. Are we willing to take the students and the classroom situation in and let them inform what we are then going to offer?

For this reason, awareness of how we breathe while teaching can tell us a lot about what we are doing with our students – if we are keeping them out, freely interacting with them, and so on. We use an exercise in our faculty workshops that helps make this concrete. (Obviously, if a participant is physically incapable of completing the exercises or feels uncomfortable with them, they can opt out.) First, we ask participants to throw an imaginary ball or rock several times and to note what happens. They often begin by noting that the body must move back (in the windup) before it can move forward. Similarly, they then note that the movement of throwing is linked with the rhythm of the breath; the thrower tends to inhale on the wind-up and exhale on the throw. To highlight how important that is, we then ask participants to “do it wrong,” exhaling on the wind-up and inhaling on the throw itself. Try it yourself; you’ll find that it is very awkward and unnatural. We further explore this relationship between breath and movement by asking participants to take a breath, stop, hold it, then throw or to throw before they have fully taken in a breath. Holding our breath or rushing to push our breath out often manifests itself in our vocal habits in class.

We then give them practice in noting even more very subtle ways they might be preventing the free flow of breath. Participants work as partners, with one lying on the floor, observing the natural rise and fall of his or her breath and the other kneeling alongside, first just watching and then placing hands on the lower abdomen to feel the movement of the breath. This tactile work helps the participants to locate where the muscles are releasing, learning that the essence here is not controlling the breath but releasing it. You can do that work right now. One of the habits that we can fall into is shallow breathing, breathing just enough to stay alive, to sit writing at a computer or reading. You might notice now, as you read this, where the breath is moving in your torso. Does it tend to drop deeply into the abdomen? Is most of the movement high in the chest? Is it a full breath or a fairly shallow one?

These exercises may seem far removed from actual teaching, but they are not. Every one of us, whether we are aware of it or not, breathes while teaching, and the quality of our breathing is reflected in how we interact with the students. Holding our

breath as a student asks a question, for example, will make it physically more difficult to respond to the question because we will need to exhale first and rebalance our breathing before we can speak. If we are lecturing but breathing shallowly, there will be a strained quality to the voice, diminishing the capacity for vocal projection and perhaps signaling anxiety or tension to the students. On the other hand, breathing easily signals relaxation and can convey confidence and ease, and it may even make it easier for the students to concentrate on the class material.

Muscle tension

Beyond breathing, there are many other physical sensations of which we are often unconscious. For example, many of us tend to hold habitual tension in our bodies. You might take a moment now to pay attention to the muscles in your shoulders or your jaw. There is a good possibility that you will feel a little tension— tension that can be consciously released as you drop the shoulders or the lower jaw. Just as with shallow breathing, tension is a habit that impedes our work in the classroom. It prevents us from really taking in what is happening and from responding intuitively to the needs of the moment. As with the breathing, however, the key is not to control our bodies more (for example, by exhorting ourselves to “relax!”) but simply to locate muscular tension and then let it go. We use moving and stretching exercises in the workshop to help tight muscles unwind, and we suggest that stretching before going into class might be a good idea. Participants find that suggestion very useful.

Voice

In addition to its many other benefits, paying attention to our breathing and muscle tension also allows us to support our voice more fully. Sound is vibration, after all, and tense muscles cancel vibration and can strain the voice. The end result can be vocal fatigue or even injury.

Equally as importantly, any limiting of our voice means that we run the risk of conveying messages to the students that we do not really intend. By the time an instructor starts teaching, she or he has probably developed unconscious vocal habits. Rodenberg (1992) describes a variety of such habits, such as the “push.” In “the push,” the speaker attempts to command attention or to convey confidence by speaking in a loud and forceful tone. The problem is that the students in that situation are likely to feel “talked at” rather than “talked with,” and as a result, the classroom relationship suffers. On the other hand, if the professor does not fully inhabit her or his voice, the students are likely to find the class boring or to feel that the professor is out of touch with them. The point here is that our unconscious and habitual use of the voice can take away from the effectiveness of the class and the students’ ability to understand the material.

Becoming aware of our vocal habits and exploring the many ways we can create sound can give us more possibilities for engaging our students. We can then widen our vocal range and explore new possibilities of varying volume, pitch, projection, rhythms, and timbre. When our voices are full, supported, and resonant, they are naturally more alive.

Using physical space

As we saw in discussing breathing, in order to operate successfully in an environment, we first have to take it in. This is as true in the social environment as it is in the natural environment. We have many capacities for sensing others beyond just seeing and hearing them. We can sense their proximity. If we are paying attention to what is going on, we can sense when someone comes up behind us or is looking at us from across a room. We can even tell by the subtlest of cues if people are really listening to us or if they are lost in their thoughts. This capacity to detect incredible subtlety in the behavior of others is simply part of our everyday communicating.

However, even though we have access to all this information at any moment, we are often blind to it in class because we are anxious about whether what we are saying is going to make sense, or attempting to stick close to the agenda, or just because we are operating on autopilot and not really paying attention to what is going on. Then we wonder why we are exhausted at the end of class or why the students are texting instead of listening!

One of the ways we can increase our effectiveness in the classroom is to think of inviting the whole body to listen, not relying just on ears or eyes. In our workshops we do a number of exercises aimed at sensitizing individuals to the space around us that we have the ability to sense. You might think of this as “personal space” or “social space,” the indefinable distance around ourselves in which we feel movement or attention from others. We can use this information to facilitate our relationship in the moment with students.

For example, think of the personal sphere of comfort that each person has when talking to another. How close is too close? How far is too far? Most of us, at least those who share a culture, can sense these socially and personally established boundaries (Hall, 1990). Imagine talking with someone and having that person be just one step too close to you. That can feel very uncomfortable! Similarly, if someone is further away than we would like, the person can seem distant.

In a classroom situation there are many ways that this information, when it is conscious, can be used productively to meet the needs of the moment. The first thing is to understand what our own habits are. How far do we typically stand from the students? Do we move frequently? Do we approach them? Are we close enough to be in their faces? How do we feel in each of those moments, and how do the students seem to feel? There is no rule about what “ought” to be done in these kinds of situations. However, becoming aware of what our habits are and what feelings we are looking for (or avoiding) in those moments can give us new possibilities. If, for example, we tend to stand far away from the students, up at a blackboard, what might happen if, at moments where the energy of the class seems low, we approach the front row of students? If we are breaking an expectation, the students might suddenly notice that something is different and will bring their attention back to what is happening. Finding where our comfort areas are and then challenging them can bring new energy into a classroom interaction.

Relationship patterns

Related to the way we interact physically with students is the way in which we interact with them emotionally. What are our habits? Do we want to be leaders, having the students follow our instructions? Do we like to feel like collaborators with our students? Do we want them to like us, worship us, or respect us? The ways we assert leadership and construct our relationships with the students play a role in how the class unfolds.

In our workshops we do an exercise that helps the participants get a greater awareness of the dynamics that they bring to relationships in the classroom, and in particular to authority and leader/follower relationships. Partners initially stand back to back, simply becoming aware of themselves in relationship to the partner. We ask them to notice how the back feels in contact and then to pay attention to what they are doing – Pushing? Holding back? Resisting? Wanting to be supported? Trying to take control? We ask participants to note their tendency when put in that situation. Then we designate A's and B's, asking A's to take over and subtly push on the B's. We ask B's to look for their reactions as they are being pushed. Do they resist? Do they retreat? We ask them to note feelings brought on as they are pushed. We switch roles, having B's push, both partners noting physical and emotional responses.

We move the exercise from back-to-back to face-to-face, designating A's to lead and B's to follow, asking partners to note what it feels like to be the "leader" or the "follower." We add variations, for instance having A's continue to lead, but to do so in a half-hearted way. After some time we ask A's to apply more force and B's to resist. We switch partners, giving B's the chance to lead and repeat the variations. Finally, we ask both partners to try to lead simultaneously. This exercise helps faculty members learn kinesthetically how they engage in relationships with others. They often note that this visceral struggle to develop a leader-follower relationship with the other resembles their experience in class. Through all of this work, we remind participants to pay attention to breathing and to their physical and emotional sensations, as a way or reminding them that relationships are experienced with the whole body.

We also explore classroom relationships in a concrete and visual way drawn from family sculpting (e.g., Satir, 1983; Papp, Silverstein, & Carter, 1973). One participant takes several other members of the group and arranges them physically in the room so as to represent how that classroom relationship feels to the instructor. For example, an instructor who feels like the students are bored and disconnected might set up the scene with those who are playing the students laying on the floor and snoring loudly. Making the classroom relationship this vivid and concrete often sheds light on feelings that the instructor may be experiencing but might not be fully aware of. Then once the current relationship is visualized like this, we ask the participant to re-arrange the scene to represent how she or he would ideally like the relationship to feel, whether it is with the instructor as an authority figure, or as a collaborator, or as a facilitator. We have found this exercise to be very powerful. Once we are viscerally aware how we are feeling with a class, we have more options for creating the kind of classroom relationship that we want.

These awareness practices enable us to move beyond our habits and to participate more fully, and with more choices, in our classroom interactions with students. Being

there physically and emotionally is the beginning. Engaging in the process of the class itself is next.

Narrative

We know that our students are captivated by stories, from movies and television to the dramas that they share with each other face to face and through social media. What would our classroom experience be like if our students were equally as captivated by our teaching? Teaching is, in fact, very much like storytelling. Storytelling, defined broadly, is simply embodied narrative — a process in which a narrative is conveyed, in real time, through voice, gesture, and physical presence, from a speaker to listeners (see Lipman, 1999, for one discussion). A narrative is simply a description of a situation, a change that happens to that situation, and the result of that change. The speaker attempts to weave a coherent narrative and hopes that the listeners are engaged by it. Seen this way, all teaching is storytelling, whether we are detailing descriptions of historical events, solving an equation, or demonstrating the links between predator and prey populations in an ecosystem. We “tell the story” of a subject by taking the students from a situation in which they don’t understand a phenomenon to one in which they do.

Note that we are not talking about literally telling stories in class, though of course many teachers do that. We are speaking metaphorically about conceptualizing the process of teaching as storytelling. Doing so can bring insights that can help us make our teaching more alive.

Story

Stories have special qualities that make them particularly powerful. First, organizing knowledge into stories seems to be a natural way in which our brains deal with complex information (Schank, 1990; Turner, 1996). We also recall information that is presented in narratives much better than information presented as abstract principles (Schank & Berman, 2002). Stories can also convey a great deal of information compactly by using our brain’s innate tendency to fill in the gaps in what we hear. For example, if Jane said that she went to a restaurant but ended up hungry because they only served dishes containing meat, someone listening could conclude that she is a vegetarian, even though that information was not really explicitly stated. We interpolate and know it without being told. Storytelling is an efficient way of conveying information that is complex or contradictory.

Equally as importantly, people love stories. Stories that are satisfying take ideas and unite them with feeling. It is one thing to learn the fact that people sometimes die because of misunderstandings; it is quite another to learn that same lesson by watching the last scene of “Romeo and Juliet” (McKee, 1997). In fact, that marriage of ideas and emotions is very much what we want to happen in our classes. We want students not just to understand the ideas we offer to them but to have a passion for them – and if not for the exact idea that we are teaching, then at least for the intellectual enterprise of learning, for the process of discriminating good information from bad, for the experience of discovery. When we ask faculty during our workshops about their best teaching experiences, they typically do not say, for example, “My best teaching moment was when the regression equation came out exactly correct.” Instead, they talk about times

when the students were passionate, when they were excited, when they argued, when they were not just intellectually but also emotionally engaged with the material being taught.

If our teaching were to tap into the yearning that students have for satisfying stories, then we would have something the students would want to listen to and want to be a part of. That, in turn, would draw them into attending to what we are saying and getting something from it.

One way to do that is to conceptualize teaching as storytelling. It doesn't take much to find the narrative in virtually any subject; after all, pretty much any lesson has a beginning, a middle, and an end. All you have to do is think of it as a story that you will help unfold for the students. An example from one of our specialties might be the explanation of the symptoms of schizophrenia. These symptoms can easily be found by opening up any textbook on abnormal behavior or in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (American Psychiatric Association, 2000). Simply listing the symptoms conveys the material, but it doesn't exploit the potential narrative in it. To do that, a teacher might describe a person with a puzzling array of symptoms – odd beliefs, difficulties perceiving and expressing emotion, and a lack of self-care. She might then comment that if we take those behaviors and examine them in the light of research and practice in clinical psychology, we find that the most likely diagnosis would be schizophrenia. The story could even go on, since even now there are substantial controversies about whether these criteria really capture what schizophrenia is, or, in some people's minds, whether "schizophrenia" as a discrete disorder really exists at all!

By highlighting the narrative potential in this kind of explanation, the teacher can tap into the longing for story that all of us have. Virtually any topic can be conceptualized as an adventure because there is nearly always a set of premises (a scene and characters) and some kind of solution or conclusion (an ending) towards which the explanation leads. As long as the students are wondering what is coming next, there is the possibility for a story. This is the case in any discipline that requires problem-solving. After all, isn't there a good deal of drama in seeing whether an experiment in a chemistry lab will come out right? Doesn't any computer program begin with a set of principles that, when arranged correctly, will lead the computer to do something new and different? We really don't have to "do" much to exploit these narrative possibilities. The material that we teach already has plenty of dramatic potential, and all we have to do is highlight that potential and bring it into the foreground.

Telling

Thinking of what we teach as stories is one part, as it were, of the story. The second part is the telling – how we actually interact with students in the moment of being in the classroom with them. The most important point to make here is this: Storytelling, just like teaching, is inherently a relationship act. At the heart of this relationship is a dynamic give-and-take, in which the speaker offers a story to the listeners, who in turn have an impact on the telling of the story. Each particular telling of a story is a unique event, happening once and only once, with that storyteller offering that particular story to that particular group of listeners at that particular time. On the one hand, that means that there are no easy formulas that can tell us how a particular topic ought to be taught.

At the same time, it means that new experiences and new meanings can come out of a storytelling event even if the story is one that has been told hundreds of time, such as the story of elementary calculus.

Our view is that no matter what topic we are teaching, the listeners need to be able to participate in creating the story. Sometimes that is explicit, as in a class that allows for or encourages questions and discussion. But it is equally true in a lecture class. An example from the theatre might be useful here. If you have ever been in or attended a theatrical production, you know that performances can vary widely from one night to the next. The script, the actors, the director, and the set are all the same, but the audience is not, and the actors respond to the different qualities of audiences even though there is no explicit dialogue between actors and listeners. Some audiences laugh loudly, and the actors need to set a more leisurely pace. Some audiences react to moments that the actors simply don't expect, and so the actors then find new meaning in the lines they have learned. The actors respond differently to the energy of each audience, and they do it with their voices, their bodies, and all of the other elements of their stage presence. All of this is exactly why live theatre is so exciting. If the actors made themselves impervious to the audience, a great deal would be lost, and the theatre experience would be much more like going to a film.

This is exactly the situation in the classroom. Imagine a class session in which the instructor stuck so closely to the lecture plan that she did not notice when students raised their hands to ask questions. Typically in that situation the students eventually lower their hands and give up. That's an obvious example of the story being closed, with no opportunity for the listeners to have an impact on it. However, even in a lecture class with a very clearly outlined content, if the teacher is open to the students, the way that the students react will change the nuances, the pace, and perhaps even the level of detail that the teacher gives. This is exactly what is supposed to happen, and it is one of the many differences between live teaching and learning from a book.

For us to open up the story we have to be willing to let go of our expectations about just how the class session ought to go. This is much trickier than it may seem because we are not always aware of the expectations we are holding. In our workshop we do an exercise that helps faculty uncover that kind of hidden expectation; it is drawn from Keith Johnstone's work in improvisational theatre (1987). The group stands in a circle and tells a story one word at a time, with each person adding a word when it is her or his turn. This exercise is surprisingly difficult because, as we go through it, the faculty often find that they have specific directions that they think the story should go in, but they have only one word to use to make that happen! This exercise demands that the participants to let go of their individual agendas. It is often hard at first. But when they eventually do so, they often find a great deal of freedom and flow when they let the others in the group have an effect on the story is being told.

It is very much the same in class. The instructor needs to be willing to let the current intellectual, physical, and emotional state of the students affect the way she or he teaches. Note that we are not talking about abandoning the plan for the class (though we have probably all had times when that needed to happen for one reason or another). A storytelling analogy here would be that if a storyteller is telling an Irish folk tale, she obviously would not stop in the middle and start telling a Chinese folk tale because she

senses that the audience is not paying attention. But she might well shift her language somewhat (if she notices that the audience can't understand when she speaks in dialect) or might move closer to the audience (if she senses that they are feeling distant from her) or might pause more and make eye contact with them (if she senses that they are checking out). These same kinds of processes can take place in class. In fact, most faculty members probably do this intuitively.

When we teach in this more open way, what we emphasize, what we linger on, what we omit, how we phrase our words – all will be influenced by the energy of the moment and what the needs and interests of the class are. That's why new ideas, new meanings, and new light can come from the material we teach, even if we have taught it many other times.

The class material

We have been talking about our relationship with the students. However, we also have a relationship to what we are teaching. One of us was recently at an event in which members of the audience told stories. At one point a man stood up and started his story by saying, "I love cement." He then went on to tell a story about building a cement wall. There were basically no characters, except him and the wall, and essentially no plot, except that he tried to build the wall, it fell down, and he had to prop it up and build it again. This story was trite, trivial, and superficial, with basically nothing in it that one would find in an instruction book about how to tell stories. But it was riveting. It was funny, and engaging, and he had the audience hanging on every word. The reason was that, in fact, he really did love cement. Not only that – he let the audience see his love of cement in a way that opened up an aliveness in them.

We call this "resonance." We assume that everyone, teachers and students alike, wants at some level to feel alive and excited and engaged by life. Part of what happens in the relationship between teacher and student is that the students will resonate with what is really happening with the teacher. If the teacher is stressed and not breathing fully, they will resonate with that tension. If the teacher is relaxed and open, the students resonate with that openness. And if the teacher feels alive and engaged with the course material, and is willing to let that aliveness be seen by the students, the part of the students that wants to be alive resonates with that.

One interesting element here is that what the teacher finds important or evocative in the subject matter doesn't necessarily have to excite the students. In the example above, very few people in the audience really cared about cement in any shape or form. But that wasn't important. What that storyteller conveyed in his story is his own aliveness in the process of building the wall, and that is what the audience resonated with. The classroom parallel is the professor's love of discovery and of learning; if the students make contact with that, then the part of them that wants to learn can be enlivened too. As we noted earlier, though, it is not just about showing lots of excitement and enthusiasm. It is also not being self-revealing in the sense of giving out details about ourselves; that is not appropriate in a classroom situation. Instead, it is simply about the teacher being authentic enough to let the students see her or his excitement and then being open enough to sense the students' reactions.

This kind of aliveness cannot be faked easily. Our task as teachers is not to perform or to pretend to have interest where we do not. Instead, we need to explore our own relationship to the material that we teach and find what in it speaks to us. Even if we teach a service course that doesn't particularly move us, there are likely to be moments, transitions, connections, or details that we find interesting or compelling. If we can find some kind of points of contact between us and the material, where the material evokes something in us, those can provide a way of bringing life to the entire classroom experience.

Bringing story and telling into the classroom

Bringing these ideas into our everyday teaching is simple, but it can be powerful. Here are some questions that faculty members can ask themselves while teaching, both when things are not going well and when they are. Note that they all focus on heightening awareness of what is happening.

- What is the quality of your breathing like?
- Do you take the situation in before you contribute to it?
- Where do you feel tension in your body?
- How far away from the students are you? Do you feel like you can move freely in relation to them?
- How are the students breathing? Do they seem relaxed or tense?
- How do you feel (physically, emotionally, and intellectually) when you are with the students?
- What are you most connected to or energized by in what you are teaching?

The aim of these awareness practices is not problem-solving. There is no prescription or script here, such as "when students are losing focus, do X." Each situation is unique. We are simply advocating bringing awareness to the myriad kinds of information to which we have access so that we have more choices and more possibilities for bringing aliveness into any particular moment in class.

Ultimately, what we are really advocating is being different in ourselves — risking something new. Instead of pretending excitement when we do not feel it, we suggest finding the excitement that is already real for us. A good clue as to where we might find that excitement is often in what we do not want to do, so paying attention to our resistance can be just as important as paying attention to what is coming easily. Risking new experiences, risking being authentic, and risking letting go of our agendas can all be ways of letting more aliveness into our teaching.

Good teaching is not solely based in the knowledge of or enthusiasm about the discipline. It takes place in relationship with students. Because teaching is an ongoing practice, we have opportunities every day, in every class to explore the potentials discussed above. Most of us chose to become teachers because of our love of learning; we also have a deep need to share what we know and feel with students. We want to make a difference. The act of teaching offers us not only challenges, but wonderful opportunities, a constantly shifting panoply of possibilities to be explored.

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