presence in teaching: learning from teachers' narratives

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The practice of teaching is intensely personal and corporeal. Research on teaching, paying particular attention to teachers' narratives, has revealed the importance of the presence of the teacher in his/her body, personality and authenticity. The teacher in the classroom carries him/herself, his/her feelings and desires, memories of the past and future foreshadowings. The presence of the teacher is strongly conveyed by a relational component, what actually passes between teacher and students is never just an abstract concept, but a human interaction.

Key words: teaching methodology, teachers' corporeity and subjectivity, memory.

La pratica di insegnamento è intensamente personale e corporea. La ricerca sulla didattica, prestando particolare attenzione alle narrazioni degli insegnanti, ha rivelato l'importanza della presenza dell'insegnante nella sua corporeità, nella sua personalità e nella sua autenticità. L'insegnante in classe porta se stesso, i suoi sentimenti e desideri, i ricordi del passato e le prefigurazioni future. La presenza dell'insegnante è fortemente veicolata da una componente relazionale; ciò che passa effettivamente tra insegnante e studenti non è mai solo un concetto astratto, ma l'interazione umana.

Parole chiave: insegnamento, corporeità e personalità del docente, memoria.

In recent years, research on teaching has been enriched by approaches which seek to understand the experience of teaching from the "inside", paying close attention to teachers' narratives and generating new themes such as memory, embodiment, and presence in teaching. Attention to memory is implicit in narrative and biographical studies of teaching

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(Connelly, 1995) which show that early experiences have a formative impact on teacher development (Goodson, 1992; Bullough *et al.*, 1992); teachers can only teach who they are (Kelchtermans, 2009). Narrative studies of teaching also invoke the body: «Narrative, too, is a bodily reality – it concerns the very structure of our perceptions, feelings, experiences, and actions» (Johnson, 1989, pp. 374-5). Here I want to focus on the theme of *presence* in teaching, drawing first on the idea of teaching as embodied, and on teacher memories to unfold the theme.

Studies reveal teaching as embodied work (Estola, Elbaz-Luwisch, 2003; Golden, 2004). Teaching practices «are relational and formed […] as a result of particular human delights and terrors. Teaching is intensely personal and corporeal» (Griffiths, 2006, pp. 395-6). Thus embodiment is inherent in the conceptualization of practice: practice is something we could not engage in without bodies, or without a personal point of view. Practices influence one another and are "fluid": «The practice of teaching leaks into the practices of mothering, fathering, managing, facilitating, counselling, and philosophizing – and vice versa» (ivi, pp. 394-5).

I turn to a personal memory. Miss Long came into our 8th grade classroom one day to substitute for our regular English teacher. She was tall, with long dark hair tied back at her neck, and wore a tweed suit; I thought she had style. She handed out some mimeographed sheets, sat on the teacher's desk and proceeded to read to us from the early poetry of Yeats. Her rich voice captivated me. It was the first time I'd heard poetry read *as poetry*, resonant musical sound that conveyed meaning through tone and rhythm, not just through an arrangement of well-chosen words. I especially loved "The stolen child," about a child spirited away by faeries. At fourteen, I did not think for a moment that the poems might be about me. Only now, as writing mysteriously brings the memory and the words back, do I realize that at the time I was, indeed, a child – like many others – entrusted too soon with stories of «a world more full of weeping than you can understand» (Yeats, 1963, pp. 20-1). My parents had lived through pogroms in Russia and the rise of Nazism in Europe; they were lucky to escape in time but lost many family members in the Holocaust. As a child I heard bland versions of their stories, with happy endings; but these difficult stories lived and waited in my body until I could explore them further in writing.

Teachers, we find, take up a "position of presence" (Estola, Elbaz-Luwisch, 2003) in front of students. Paula, an Israeli elementary science

teacher, said, «In those moments when I am in front of the class, I am the figure that they copy… I am the person, the adult that is present in front of them» (*ibid.*). Presence in teaching is a recurring theme in response to the pervasive crisis of contemporary education (Miller, 2009; Hart, 2008). Rogers and Raider-Roth (2009, p. 266) define presence as «a state of alert awareness, receptivity and connectedness to the mental, emotional and physical workings of both the individual and the group in the context of their learning environments and the ability to respond with a considered and compassionate best next step». Miss Long was present in the classroom. She did not cater to us – she didn't introduce the poetry, explain it or engage us in discussion about it; possibly, she resented having to substitute, and resisted by spending the hour reading her favorite poetry aloud to us. But she was alert and aware, and in bringing the work of Yeats to our class she took us seriously as people who could understand and care about poetry.

Presence requires the teacher to be herself, as fully as possible in the moment: body and mind, feelings and desires, past memories and imagined future, all the strands coming together. However, schooling is a highly regulated enterprise in which teachers play a role as representatives of the state, implementing programs that conform with policy mandates. Critical accounts of the school's reproductive function (e.g. Bourdieu, Passeron, 1990) force us to ask whether teachers can ever simply be "present" for students.

The idea of teaching as performance is a familiar one. Eisner (1994) points out that «teaching can be performed with such skill and grace that, for the student as well as for the teacher, the experience can be justifiably characterized as aesthetic». Sarason (1999, p. 51) claims that «the teacher willingly and internally defines a role with characteristics intended to elicit in an audience of students a set of reactions that will move them willingly to persist in the pursuit of new knowledge and skills»; the teacher as performer thus models for students what it means to be an engaged learner. Goffman (1959, p. 8), however, portrayed all social life as a performance in which persons act to manage the way that others see and judge them through «a potentially infinite cycle of concealment, discovery, false revelation, and rediscovery». Thus multiple meanings attend the use of "performance" as a central category in the social sciences, and in pedagogy (Gallop, 1995). Grumet highlights the contradictions in her own teaching performance, describing the comfortable old green robe she wears to write, a robe which makes present the disowned underside of proper academic demeanor. No

surprise that in engaging her students in autobiographical writing, Grumet (1995, p. 43) focuses attention on «the contradictions, the inconsistencies and the leaks» in their stories.

Thus presence in teaching cannot be taken at face value. Presence is structured by the history and politics of the institutional setting, which impact both on what people experience and on how they interpret it. However, what actually passes between teacher and students is never just ideas, much less structure, but the stuff of human interaction: communication, feeling, sensation, touch, eye contact, recognition. What makes for presence, within and shaped by historical and political conditions, is a complicated mix of «self-knowledge, trust, relationship and compassion» (Rogers, Raider-Roth, 2009, p. 266). And what is present is a body, the teacher's body standing in front of the class.

Increasingly in recent years teachers have been writing to reflect, to formulate their professional knowledge and to study teaching practice, in instructional settings (Heikkinen, 1998; Johnson, 2007; Ambler, 2012) and in spontaneous or "stolen" moments (Laneve, 2009). Working with writing in the university classroom (Elbaz-Luwisch, 2010; 2002), I have begun to see that autobiographic writing may also help teachers elaborate a sense of their own presence in teaching, which I will explore through several themes: *details*, *feelings*, *imagination* and *difference*.

Details. Paying attention to detail is generally thought to contribute to good writing. Typically academic studies are concerned with theories, generalizations and the abstract; attention to the small, concrete facts of everyday life goes against the grain, yet for teachers signals respect for everyday life in and out of the classroom. Lisa, an Israeli teacher born in the former Soviet Union, recalls a childhood memory:

> When I was 5 we visited my father's relatives and vacationed in St. Petersburg (then called Leningrad); we toured every part of this amazing city through which the Neva River flows. I remember the white nights, the many beautiful water fountains and of course we visited the palace of the Czar Peter decorated in gold.

In oral storytelling we tend to stick to what is essential for fear of losing our audience. But as we immerse ourselves in writing a meaningful story, colours, sounds and textures arise and insist on being included. Paying attention to real life helps teachers to be fully present in the classroom, ready to teach and learn.

Feelings. Attending to feelings also challenges the taken-for-granted academic divorce of thought from feeling. Noticing feelings helps teachers figure out what is really important to them. Feelings arise through conversation in a safe space, but writing allows more time and privacy to be present to one's feelings without risk of embarrassment.

One of the writing tasks I assign focuses on failure, and invites teachers to recall an episode in which they made a mess of some professional situation; writing provides the chance to give form to the mess in a way that begins to reveal the meaning of the event, to suggest what the teacher did right even in the midst of failure. One teacher recounted a time when her principal had invited her to chair a meeting on a particular topic; she had prepared for the meeting, but before she could fully present her ideas and give her colleagues the floor, the principal interrupted her, gave some directives and abruptly ended the meeting. In writing, the teacher began to see past her own humiliation to identify clearly what had been wrong in the principal's handling of the situation; the writing became an empowering experience.

Imagination. Also typically marginalized in graduate studies, the imagination is a central faculty for teachers who are immersed in the practical: we need to use our imaginations to deal with important issues arising in the classroom and the community, to experiment with new thoughts and ideas. In one class the writing task was to choose an image from a random set of animal pictures, and write a dialogue; in dialogue with a rooster standing high on a rooftop, Nabil remembered his experience as a pupil sent to a new school where he felt alone and different from those around him. The written dialogue recalled a later time when he taught math to youth at risk; he began to see how his childhood experience had served him in working with these pupils and had oriented his ongoing interest in critical pedagogy.

Difference. Students at the University of Haifa are a diverse group: Jewish and Palestinian Israelis, Moslems, Christians and Druse; religious and secular; native born and immigrants. Personal writing allows for recognition of the cultural, social and religious differences in the classroom and makes the developing learning community an interesting and rich setting, despite its complications. Too often, diversity is viewed as a problem to be managed, but in fact multiculturalism can facilitate professional learning. Writing allows teachers to express themselves clearly and fully on matters of importance to them that might at first seem too controversial to be brought to the classroom conversation.

Writing provides the space to release some of the tension of holding a difficult topic, and the time to choose words carefully. In response to a visualization around the body, Manal (a Palestinian Moslem teacher, who happened to be pregnant at the time) wrote about the terrors of the Gaza war which was then ongoing; she imagined her body as a place of refuge for all the children threatened by that war. On the same occasion a Jewish student described her experience of teaching in a small community near the Gaza border, where the children had to face repeated rocket fire by hiding under their desks in the classroom. In conversation alone, these experiences and images would likely have been expressed in the familiar terms of political debate, bringing us to polarized views rather than new understandings (see Li, Conle, Elbaz-Luwisch, 2009). When these experiences were written and shared, however, they revealed our common concern for the welfare of children, and our capacity to be present and listen to one another across conflicting identities.

We know that autobiographical writing allows teachers to reflect on and make sense of their experience and learning, but the examples brought here suggest something more. Personal writing that is rich with concrete detail and narrative description helps teachers connect «to the mental, emotional and physical workings of both the individual and the group» (Rogers, Raider-Roth, 2009) in the classroom. The knowledge community that typically takes shape in a class where writing and discussion are personal facilitates the development of the teachers' *narrative author*ity (Olson, Craig, 2001), their ability to speak out about what matters to them in the university classroom and at school, to imagine something different and challenge authoritative views of teaching and learning. In doing so, they become more fully present as teachers, more themselves and more responsive to students. The idea of presence in teaching has the potential to transform schooling, and merits further and systematic inquiry to elaborate what actually happens when teacher presence is supported and developed in schools, as Eisner (1994) and Sarason (1999) advocated.

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