

Persistence and presence

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Educational institutions naturally want their students to stay in school, and the Toronto, ON institution where I teach is currently looking at this issue through a new lens. George Brown College's discursive shift from "retention" to "persistence" places greater responsibility for success in the hands of students themselves, as opposed to in the institution's hands holding on, retaining them. It is the students who choose to stay in school, to fail and try again, to develop the resilience required to persist. As a correlate, the institution is meant to help mediate the barriers that might inhibit persistence and to create the conditions for students to see possibilities, to see their education on a long-term trajectory.

This discursive shift is a subtle one, but done well it could represent one in line with the core principles of andragogy (for example, adults as co-creators of learning experiences as opposed to passive recipients of top-down instruction). It's also a shift in perfect keeping with neo-liberalism's tendency to download responsibility onto individuals, to narrate social and institutional problems as personal failings, and to re-cast their structural solutions as matters of individual choice and control.

Still, and finally, this shift also presents an opportunity for faculty to think through some of the things we do to create conditions for student persistence – and how, and why. I submit that student persistence turns on authentic and trusting inter-human relationships more than on anything else; and further, that the practices of an institution can either support or undermine these kinds of relationships.

The relations I want to call to mind are structured in a way that reveals the distinction between retention and persistence to be at least somewhat fallacious in the first instance. A student and faculty member engaged in such a relation are not really separate, or at least they're not doing separate things.

Both parties are totally and constantly inter-dependent as they each make decisions that co-construct the encounter. Ideally, here there is mutual respect, an openness to being changed by the other, and a certain transparency and honesty. Engaging in this way consistently over time would build profound trust – useful in that people learn most effectively in contexts of perceived safety.

It would also nourish a student's disposition to see education as a significant turn in their biography, even as self-development, because, rather than as student #100866867, they have been seen as an individual and unique *self*. When the institution creates conducive conditions, encounters that support persistence, via this seeing, happen among students too (which is not strictly on the curriculum; it's difficult to quantify "solidarity" or "community" as an outcome on a course outline).

Now, such rich encounters are not necessary in order to transmit knowledge or skills per se. How to put in an IV line accurately: a very strong argument can be made for what's really important there. People invoke that old saw around "do you want a nurse caring for you who doesn't have that expertise" etc. But what kind of expertise is on the table here?

A comparison of the idealism of an old fashioned Liberal Arts education to the pragmatism of a skills-transmission model might reveal two different sorts of expertise or excellence, which would not have to be at odds with each other. It becomes important now to avoid any kind of romance and to sidestep any discussion of beliefs; I'm not particularly interested in what people – including myself – believe. I focus instead on experiences, my own and reports of others'. At the same time, whatever we do in education will necessarily be animated by what we think education is/is for.

The values and aesthetics endemic to a traditionally-conceived Liberal Arts education resolve into a view of excellence concerned with the development of a whole self, and the realization of its highest potential. So here education is "for" self-actualization, even enlightenment, and there is no reason whatsoever to imagine that a student thereof would not also be employable; skills-transmission models of education and training are not in some sort of irreconcilable opposition to all this. One need only invoke the stereotype of the almost spiritual relationship of a master carpenter and their apprentice to see this is not a binary between wisdom on the one hand and skills on the other.

Yet the current incarnations of many transmission models tend to construct "excellence" around competition, precision, and innovation – ultimately casting education as "for" employability. On closer inspection, though, if we consider the brutal competitiveness of many Liberal Arts environments (think of cutthroat post grads at the water cooler, or sneering at one another in academic journals), it seems that excellence is constructed in just the same way! On both models, then, often success is measured externally and can occur despite, and very often at the expense of, whatever is going on inside you.

In my experience, a certain orientation toward the inner life of the human being, one that addresses and honours its development, is more likely to call a student to be all they can be, to awaken the best in themselves; in Nursing, it might stimulate a luminous sense of purpose of *self as healer*. And I prefer the nurse who sees themselves that way in addition to being able to do their job, seeing as they'll be encountering me at my most vulnerable.

That sense of faculty needing students, too, as well as vice versa, can start during course work, and can increase student confidence and motivation significantly. The concept of *intellectual mattering* is forwarded by Harriet Schwartz (2013) as both an intention we can bring to our teaching and an outcome of that work. The term describes a student's experience that their thinking matters to another person. The teacher has noticed, been touched or challenged or inspired, and has expressed this explicitly; it can be as simple as asking a student's permission to use their amazing PowerPoint next time you teach that course, or telling someone how they changed your mind about something.

These moments influence students beyond feeling good about a compliment. They speak very directly to persistence in that they can interrupt narratives of past failures and help people start to see themselves as practitioners or professionals (Schwartz, 2013). Intellectual mattering draws upon relational cultural theory, which counters theories that value autonomy as the highest level of human development and which “requires that we examine our assumptions about power in relationships and seek to develop a power-with rather than power-over approach” (ibid, p. 2).

Faculty members being able to offer experiences of intellectual mattering thus turns on (at least) two things: the capacity to be present enough to pay attention, so the noticing can be sincere, and the embodiment of enough integrity to hold our side of the power dynamic responsibly. And both of those things require that we arrive as real people, both wearing and also appearing beyond the mask of professionalism.

Wearing it, in that faculty cannot act in a way that contaminates the power dynamic, putting the student in the role of meeting my needs; we are not equal in the sense of responsibility for stewardship of the relation. I notice here that the word *authenticity* shares etymological roots with both *authorship* and *authority*. Authority precludes my going to students naked and quaking and anxious; rather I maintain the professional mask that says “It’s okay – I’ve got this”, because students can be very nervous; their stakes are higher – maybe just coming to class is really scary. If I don’t got it, then who does? Think of a flying trapeze instructor taking you up to the top of the rig, going “OOOooh, this *is* high!” So the professional mask has to do with control and boundaries, and carries the potential to eclipse a whole human being capable of connection. Such a being by definition is transparently vulnerable, which compromises a “professional” presence at times. Thus workspaces do inhibit authenticity to an extent.

Yet the word authenticity has another horizon, one introducing an honesty that fully inhabits its social location, allowing an appearance beyond or somehow overflowing that professional mask. Not only *do* I judiciously choose at times to share my own experiences of anxiety with students, in order to mirror and reassure them, but if I am to be present fully and not as teacher #504791, I must include in that presence a complex biography complete with weaknesses, fears and desires. In an article entitled “We’re all adults here”, Schwartz (2012) puts it thus:

Presence in the teaching framework means being a genuine person in our interactions with students. It begins with sharing those small details that allow our personal lives to show through the professional demeanor, but it is much more profound than that. The most essential element is to make known that real people do the work we do. We get indigestion and stay up all night with our children. We have days of self-confidence and days of doubt. Published articles do not appear magically when we sit down at the computer; we have to work at them. This level of presence and disclosure sends the message to students that *their* indigestion, children, doubts, and difficulties are not fatal flaws” (p.47).

So we arrive at the definition of integrity: rather than being fragmented, dissimulating and calculating, all the parts of a person are integrated – into a whole.

Or, is the very process of becoming a truly whole person accomplished by caring in the first place? The word solicitude, or care or concern for another, is from the Latin root *sollus*, meaning “whole”, combined with *ciere*, meaning “to arouse”. The wholeness in me is aroused, is called forth (or at its Indo-European root “set in motion”) by my own kindness and attentiveness to another. At least that’s how people talked about it in 1412, and today there are plenty of thinkers who are unafraid to speak Love’s name in learning spaces. Because a sort of unconditional love must indeed drive these relations.

My goodness. What a great lot of mindfulness, critical self-reflection, and work! Why would faculty do that: why would we care so much? And where would we get the time?

If we experience the institution as having practices that alienate and that truncate the possibilities of these kinds of loving, invested relationships (such as fewer full-time positions, larger class sizes, both meaning less time for one-to-one interactions), that must affect if/how we might engage with people on the levels required. So do there remain possibilities of really affecting how these things play out, in the current neoliberal cultural landscape and competitive market economy?

It is not a product of our self-pitying reveries how that culture and that economy damage our capacity to remain whole, authentic, and at peace. We are atomized and made solely responsible for all our own fears. The deeply internalized logic that guides neoliberalism has to do with merit, with performance. Competition will reward hard workers; so totally unregulated, unfettered competition must reward *really* hard workers. The very structure of the system, where wealth is actually almost always passed down generationally, is made invisible by this narrative. Rather, exertion on your bootstraps is the only factor in success, so *what is wrong with you* if your efforts are met with frustration and alienation?

The brilliant journalist George Monbiot (2014) writes:

The workplace has been overwhelmed by a mad, Kafka-esque infrastructure of assessments, monitoring, measuring, surveillance and audits, centrally directed and rigidly planned, whose purpose is to reward the winners and punish the losers...

These shifts have been accompanied... by a spectacular rise in certain psychiatric conditions: self-harm, eating disorders, depression and personality disorders. Of the personality disorders, the most common are performance anxiety and social phobia; both of which reflect a fear of other people, who are perceived as both evaluators and competitors, the only roles for society that market fundamentalism admits. Depression and loneliness plague us. The infantilising diktats of the workplace destroy our self-respect. Those who end up at the bottom of the

pile are assailed by guilt and shame. The self-attribution fallacy cuts both ways: just as we congratulate ourselves for our successes, we blame ourselves for our failures, even if we had little to do with (them) (para. 10-12).

Such a competitive ambit does all of this to self-esteem, but an honest reckoning with social location precludes the claim that it does so for all equally. Those without job security (a solid majority in post-secondary classroom delivery) know this inequity well. However, those who are racialized (or who live outside of dominant constructions of gender identity) may experience it more starkly. For example, it's not difficult to imagine how maintaining the appearance of expertise comes with higher stakes for racialized faculty. When such a person reveals human weakness or "days of doubt", when they admit to not knowing an answer, they face an increased risk of responses along the lines of, "Yeah, well, it figures *you* don't know what you're doing..."

Yet for everyone, to an extent, the fearful landscape articulated by Monbiot keeps the professional mask firmly in place. It can thus be hard to act in spontaneous or heartfelt ways, and we may be further inhibited by how hard it is to speak coherently about teaching and learning when even the old codes of Liberal Arts education have been scrambled. Speaking of, every morning on my way to work I pass a GBC billboard that reads "Hire Education".

Using this little orthographic twist to underline the employment-focused nature of the institution doesn't seem to strike anyone as a bit cynical or ironic – and why should it? GBC was conceived in the spirit of applied trades and work common to community colleges in 1967. But was there, at that time, a bit more space for the spiritual side of apprenticeship, for finding a calling or at least an identity in the trades that had to do with your inner world? In any event all other dimensions of *higher* education – like the self-actualization it might promise – is put squarely at the service of "employability" in that particular marketing piece.

These tensions are by no means particular to GBC. All institutions are very naturally subject to entropy; over time the logic that birthed them is perverted by the pressures and fashions and exigencies of the day.

Institutions are the product of human will, and as such, are rational, generalizable; we need institutions as we go about organizing human activity across ever-increasing numbers of people with ever-decreasing material and temporal resources. But by participating uncritically we risk alliance with the purportedly neutral, hideous bodiless head that narrates textbooks, that dictates rules and utters pronouncements; we revert to being teacher #504791, talking to its correlative student.

But unwritten rules are easy to break, and when we are present, we see that there is always something we can do. For example: trying and failing multiple times, or exiting and returning to our program multiple times is against the rules, or at least is not looked upon kindly by our funder. But there *are* those for whom the fourth time is the trick. And maybe

each encounter preceding that pivotal decision to finally say yes to one's own life has been marked, at least by me, with a strengths-based, non-shaming, unequivocal welcome that insists that individual both deserves and is capable of post-secondary education. That they appear beyond and overflow the rules – as does my presence. So we can be together there.

This works, in my experience; students with whom sincere connection has been established often demonstrate striking levels of resilience and do persist, and eventually succeed. This is not a belief; it happens that way. Presence works, and has more to do with *how* as opposed to *how much*; tracking of resource expenditure is neither required nor adequate to capture it. We are professionals and we *do* have the power to make choices, even in moments of marginalization, precariousness and anxiety; Parker J. Palmer (2007) reminds us that institutions

are neither other than us nor alien to us; institutions *are* us. The shadows that institutions cast over our ethical lives are external expressions of our own inner shadows, individual and collective. If institutions are rigid, it is because we fear change. If institutions are competitive, it is because we value winning over all else. If institutions are heedless of human need, it is because something in us is also heedless.

If we are even partly responsible for creating institutional dynamics, we also possess the power to alter them... Only when we become accountable for the darkness we create will we be able to evoke the 'better angles of our nature', inner sources of light that make both individuals and institutions more humane (p.9).

And that accountability or authorship is *what* and perhaps *all* I have control over – and that's a lot. I exercise it to transmit how I feel about the people in the classroom: folks of precious unicity, separate from me, of equal complexity and value to me. It's amazing how much you can smuggle into an institution under the cover of practices aimed at greater collaboration, aimed at making structures more amenable to internally-focused relationships.

How we model grappling with the big questions at the core of our humanity, how we cultivate this basic orientation toward presence, and how we relentlessly underscore the socially constructed nature of power – these decisions matter. They can increase the likelihood of students resisting the injustice around them and challenging the apathy and fear within them – because they will be becoming *people* who are more likely to do these things. These decisions then in turn cannot fail to impact, over time, the fabric of our institutions themselves.

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