

Book Reviews

Making Sense of Methods in the Classroom: A Pedagogical Presence.
Anne Hill. Lanham, MD, Toronto, ON, Oxford, UK: Rowman
and Littlefield, 2006, 148 pages.

Reviewed by: *Khalida Syed*
University of Alberta

Introduction

This book begins with the ordinary, twice daily routine of taking attendance in an elementary classroom. A teacher asks herself the question "Am I present?" thus introducing the text's focus on the dynamic pedagogical relationship between curriculum, children, and teachers. It ends with a challenge to recognize the limitations imposed through the mirror image of reflective teaching practice and to reclaim an ancient, organic, and dynamic image preserved by Ovid. Ovid's tale of reflection in the myth of Narcissus "is an organic tale." Hill explains Ovid's ancient story and sums up by saying, "I believe he is suggesting that reflection is an act of reciprocal relation. It is when we fail to understand the nature of our reflection that we place ourselves at risk—as Narcissus did" (p. 116).

Summary

Throughout seven chapters, Hill layers classroom stories, insights offered by teachers and children, children's literature, the discourses of philosophy, and educational theory, questioning the diverse meanings that underlie the language of teaching and learning in the classroom. She concludes with a caution regarding exclusionary discourses and the need to make connections through a diversity of traditions and cultures. The actions, interactions, and words of the elementary teachers who contributed to the research forming the basis of the book are interpreted as expressions of professional and personal knowledge developed through an embodied awareness of their daily relationships with children, parents, and curriculum. The author shows how this knowledge is often unarticulated, but develops continually as part of a process of personal and professional development that is lifelong and self-sustaining.

Overview of Chapters

In Chapter 1, "Are You Present?" Hill offers her and her colleagues' stories of what it means to be pedagogically present with children in the classroom. Chapter 2, "Questioning Our Presence," focuses on what teachers and teacher educators can learn by questioning the meaning of what it is to be pedagogically present.

In Chapter 3, "A Reconciliation of Theory and Practice," Hill says, "It is not a question of choosing either one method or the other. It is not a question of

Khalida Tanvir Syed is a doctoral candidate in the Faculty of Education at the University of Alberta. Her research interests include language, literature, culture, and multiculturalism.

eliminating methodologies, until the right one is found. It is, rather, essential to maintain a to and fro within the body of knowledge that constitutes our epistemology" (p. 59). The reader is encouraged to be curious in the classroom, to listen to the children, to become immersed in the language of schools, to appreciate the many forms of narratives, to listen to classroom narratives, to be thoughtful and attentive, and to make sense of the telling and retelling of teaching stories.

In Chapter 4, "Sense and Presence in Classrooms," Hill contextualizes the intentional word play of the book's title. I believe it is most readily summed up by the writer's reference to Parker Palmer (1998). "Teachers make and hold connections in their hearts, meaning 'heart' in its ancient sense, as the place where the intellect and emotion and spirit converge in the human self" (p. 93). Making sense of methods in the classroom requires the use of six senses: a sense of the past, or memory; a sense of hope and expectation; the senses of touch, voice, silence; and a sense of seeing and being seen, of being face to face. She again layers teachers' stories with stories from children's literature and with philosophers and educational theorists.

It is the section on silence that I found most meaningful. In our academic conversations, we attend to voice, but we frequently ignore silence. Hill asks, "Why is there silence now? What is the meaning of this silence?" She asks these questions in the context of watching and listening to the children and in reflections on an experience while reading a story to the children. Quoting Rich (1978), Hill says that silence "is 'a presence' with a history and a form. We are not to 'confuse it with any kind of absence.' Do not think that silence means no voice" (p. 82). Western ways of thinking have not taught how to hear meaning "outside the words" (p. 82).

In Chapter 5, "Teaching with an Embodied, Aesthetic Perception," Hill introduces the notion of aesthetic form as a model for understanding teaching practice. Referring to Habermas, Hegel, Kant, Grumet, Langer, Levin, and Marcuse, she suggests that aesthetic form is one way to understand the complexities of teaching. Because she believes the word *aesthetic* is not in common usage in the language of education, she describes the history of its use and lost meanings. She says,

It has at different times been variously identified with one of three main ideas: the perceptual, the beautiful and the artistic. There hardly anything of the first, perceptual, surviving in contemporary usage, except in the negative form, anaesthetic... If we interpret the meaning of to perceive to include all of the senses, and if we do not give primacy to the visual, we come "nearer to the language and sense of the ancients." (p. 96)

In Chapters 6 and 7, "Teaching and Learning: An Aesthetic Sense" and "What Now?" Hill briefly reviews the findings of her research and makes suggestions for inclusiveness in education research. As educators, she suggests that we should remember our own schooling and learning, we should acknowledge not only the public language of education, but also the private languages, those that may include silences. She emphasizes the significance of collaboration in order to create and sustain a broad community and a need to pay attention to the usage of language and its interpretation. It is not a matter of whether educators can learn to be pedagogically present with their students,

but that in the world today, “we have no choice but to be pedagogically present ... The differences among us are such that similarity of language is insufficient for understanding” (p. 132). The last chapter focuses on questions related to learning environments that may support the engagement of student teachers and teachers in dialogues so that they can be open to face the uncertainties of teaching and learning.

Strengths and Limitations

One of the strengths of this book is its presentation of a polyphony of voices. Hill respects the voices of classroom teachers, student teachers, educators, and children. There is humor throughout the book, which gives readers spaces to breathe in the philosophies of ancient and current philosophers and merges and enhances each voice.

Another strength is the introduction of a “logic of the senses.” In educational literature, we are accustomed to frameworks and models that offer a structure for our analytical thinking. Hill claims that an aesthetic model offers an organic structure in which flux, flow, and rhythm become what Deleuze (1993) described as a “logic of the senses” (p. 97). A logic of the senses might allow educators to “look toward the particulars of one comprehensive entity—whether that is a curriculum guide, a program of studies, a child, or a class of children, and all the while be aware that there is more” (p. 109). If educators are to make progress with the complexities that challenge them in the global environment that is our world, there is a need to pay attention to a form of logic that acknowledges the senses we bring to teaching practice.

Hill’s book is directed to early childhood educators, teachers, student teachers, and beginning teachers, and may be of less immediate interest to policy-makers, school administrators, and legislators. Readers expecting a more traditional academic style of writing may be disappointed. Hill has chosen instead to write in a style that is accessible to readers from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds, as well as to readers who are involved in the teaching of young children and research in education. Her book is a valuable addition to the literature on the pedagogical relationship between curriculum, children, and teachers.

References

- Deleuze, G. (1993). *The Deleuze reader*. (C. Boundas, Ed. & Trans.). New York: Columbia University Press.
- Palmer, P. (1998). *The courage to teach*. New York: Jossey-Bass.
- Rich, A. (1978). *The dream of a common language*. New York: W.W. Norton.