



THINK TANK: Teacher to Student

Written by: Meredith Stephens

Why the Student-Teacher Relationship is Essential to Learning

“Teaching is a relation, one to which both teacher and student contribute”
(Noddings, 2016, p. 53)

Before my interview for my first high school teaching post in 1983 I memorized the Education Department policies. The first policy is the only one that I still remember: “The student-teacher relationship is at the heart of learning.”

After spending just a few years teaching high schoolers in Adelaide and then London, I did post-graduate study in Applied Linguistics at Macquarie University. I then moved to Shikoku, Japan and have been teaching in various universities there for over twenty years. I have taught Vietnamese, Greek, and Italian children in Adelaide; Bangladeshi, French, and Italian children in London; and Japanese, Croatian, and Swedish students in Japan. In all of these teaching contexts, I have stumbled along, often not listening to my students carefully enough, sometimes impatient, trying to live up to the ideal expressed in the policy document.



Skye Playsted ([this issue](#)) discusses a teacher’s love of their students and a teacher’s love of teaching. I understand this feeling. When I was in my twenties, the children in the class would sometimes inadvertently shout out to me “Mum!” and then cringe in

embarrassment when they realized what they had said. Thirty years later a student in my seminar announced to the class as he pointed at me “We feel the love!” I was taken aback. When I was a high school teacher we were told to act *in loco parentis* but I hadn’t necessarily considered this responsibility to extend to teaching at a university. Still, the student in my seminar must have felt cared-for to have said that.



The author teaching Year 9 in 1990

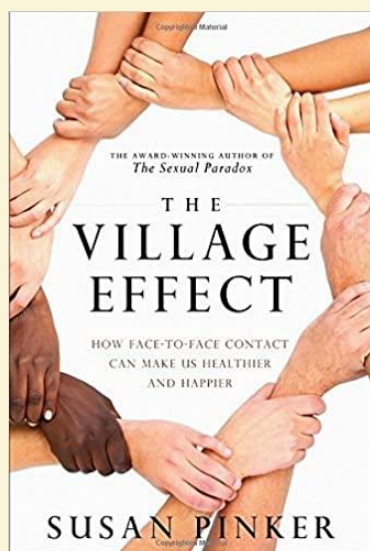
One Saturday morning, as I was writing this essay, I called my daughter to ask how she was doing. As part of her degree in Clinical Psychology she is required to engage in a clinical placement. She told me about how one of the psychologists, Jack, was mentoring her and how helpful this had been. He is a busy professional and was not even assigned to help her, but gave up his time to listen to her and advise her. Then, unprompted, she reflected on how pivotal certain teachers had been in propelling her in her studies over the years. The high point of her secondary school education was Mishka, her art teacher. Mishka taught her a lot about painting, encouraged her ideas, and had high expectations of her. Then she went on to study Visual Arts at university. Louise, her sculpture teacher, liked my daughter’s answers to her questions and, if she thought she could get a better answer, she pushed her again. These challenges helped my daughter grow. Another art teacher at university, Julie, demonstrated a good feedback loop. Julie invested in her and expected her to do well. After studying Visual Arts, my daughter moved into Psychology and had to study Statistics. She was unable to follow the first class, taught by Paul. She didn’t want to

drop out but she could understand the feeling of those who did. She would often go to Paul's office and he was happy to answer her questions. Paul helped her develop confidence to do Statistics. (Her second Statistics teacher was less approachable and my daughter was glad that she was not the first teacher she had encountered. Unlike with Paul, she would not have been able to ask questions of this teacher. Nor would she have ever believed that she was capable of doing Statistics.) She added more names to this list of helpful teachers, but I don't have space to list them all here. Referring to these teachers, she said, "I am interested and curious and they want to teach me more." In my role as parent, I have never met Jack, Mishka, Louise, Julie, or Paul, but if I did, I would thank them.

One of my pedagogical concerns at the university is that language learning is often removed from the one of the essential functions of language use, that of interpersonal exchange. Children studying for English exams in Japan are given books containing vocabulary in alphabetical order to memorise for entrance exams. Exercises and tests consist of multiple-choice exercises and comprehension exercises which are distant from the authentic context of human interaction.

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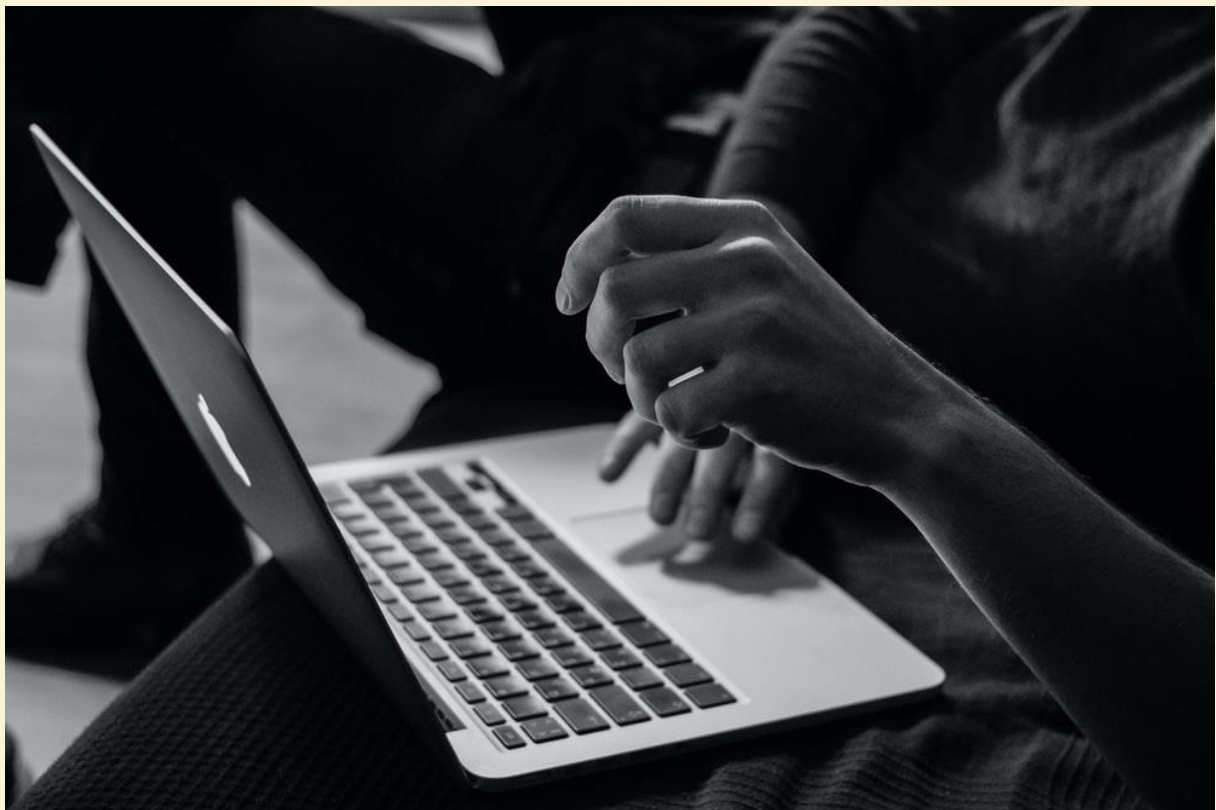


Scholars from a range of fields provide insights into the importance of human relationships for learning in general. (Those listed here are not specifically for language learning). My favourite book from the last few years is psychologist Susan Pinker's (2014) [*The Village Effect: Why Face-to-Face Contact Matters*](#). Pinker explains the role of the neuropeptide oxytocin in fostering trust and attachment: "Its tentacles reach into all social relationships, stretching from the bedroom to the boardroom" (pp. 232-283). According to Pinker, face-to-face contact with close friends and family members impacts health in terms of an improved immune system, adjustment of hormones, and the expression of genes involved in behaviour and resilience.

Face-to-face contact also provides advantages for education. Citing Chetty et al. (2012), Pinker explains that having a skilled teacher for even a single year outstrips

the benefit of a laptop program. (A laptop program refers to making a laptop available to every child so they can study online both at home and at school.) Parents and teachers can provide more benefits than expensive pedagogical technology. Pinker is wary because “providing a virtual education is cheaper than training excellent teachers” (p. 300). Online learning is often touted as a panacea for underprivileged learners; “school laptop programs, virtual classrooms, and MOOCs (massive open online courses) are often floated as magic bullets for underprivileged, or underserved school populations” (p. 300), but the majority of such learners drop out. Pinker indicates that many well-off parents prefer to pay for face-to-face interaction in small classes with skilled teachers.

Comparing face-to-face teaching with virtual learning



As we enter an age of online education we sometimes overlook the human context of interpersonal interaction. Language has become increasingly abstracted from its primary purpose of establishing and maintaining interpersonal relationships in order to reach certain goals. The distinction between this essential function of language and the way it is learned in virtual education is borne out in the work of Max van Manen ([2015](#)). He contrasts physical presence in face-to-face classrooms with virtual presence in synchronous and asynchronous classrooms. Surprisingly, even the face-to-face contact in synchronous virtual classrooms falls short of that in physical classrooms. On the screen, the teacher and the student cannot look each other in the

eye. Furthermore, Van Manen explains that the knowledge internalization of students in virtual classrooms is “less charged with affect” (p. 137). Accordingly, the visceral experiences of eye contact and emotion, which aid internalization of knowledge, are less powerful in virtual classrooms.

Pinker (2014) argues “the reality of an interaction-free education is sobering” (p. 301). Similarly, neuroscientist Susan Greenfield ([2014](#)) explains that virtual instruction is effective when it is used in conjunction with the support of teachers. “Nothing beats an inspirational and exciting teacher” (p. 239) she reminds us, lamenting the decline in face-to-face teaching in universities (even before the pandemic). Greenberg highlights the importance of dialogue in face-to-face teaching in the process of discussing issues and solving problems, arguing that this is superior to virtual communication.

[Nel Noddings](#), Lee L. Jacks Professor of Education Emerita at Stanford University has written many compelling works. The two which are particularly relevant to this discussion are [Philosophy of Education](#) (2016) and [Caring: A Relational Approach to Ethics and Moral Education](#) (2013). The former has a section devoted to “Care and Education” (pp. 230-238). Noddings defines a caring teacher as one who acts in the students’ best interests. She stresses the importance of dialogue in establishing a caring relationship. The teacher needs to learn about the student through feedback from them in order to be able to care. The latter book is a discussion of the ethics of caring, extending to a consideration of how to care for animals, plants, and even ideas. Of note is Noddings’ contrast of teaching with lecturing: “I can lecture to hundreds, and this is neither inconsequential nor unimportant, but this is not teaching. To teach involves a giving of self and a receiving of other” (p. 113).



Caveats

Caring for everyone is impossible: “Painful as it is to give up romantic notions of loving everyone, we see that we must in order to care adequately for anyone” (Noddings, 2013, p. 153). Referring to the work of Jaques Derrida (1995), van Manen (2015) explains: “we constantly fail, as we cannot possibly be responsive to every other who is out there and who also makes an appeal to our caring responsibility. Because we can only worry about one thing at a time, we cannot worry about everyone and everything” (p. 72).



There are necessary limitations to our ability to care. Nevertheless, the teacher-student relationship remains central to learning, as the policy document indicated to me when I was applying for my first teaching position nearly forty years ago. Virtual learning, flipped learning, and listening to lectures continue to be important, but they will not replace the critical role of the student-teacher relationship. As caring teachers, let us fight to keep the human context primary. There are no easy ways to do this with online classes or even face-to-face classes, but teachers have faced and overcome many other challenges. This is just one more challenge to apply our skills to.

References

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