



Being There: The Role of Faculty Presence in Student Engagement

Imagine that you and a longtime friend are talking. What are the observable cues that indicate whether they are actively engaged in the conversation? Are they making eye contact? Listening to what you have to say before responding? Asking questions and waiting for the answer? Sharing affirmations, challenges, insights? Looking at their cellphone throughout the conversation?

Brad Garner
Director of Faculty Enrichment,
Center for Learning and Innovation
Indiana Wesleyan University
brad.garner@indwes.edu

By the same token, we can easily flip these indicators to show a lack of interest in the conversation (e.g., looking through or around someone, talking but not listening, showing interest in sharing our own stories only, showing no visible responses to the discussion, creating the feeling that we would rather be somewhere else or with someone else). We all hope for conversations with friends and colleagues that highlight engagement and a lively exchange of ideas. Sadly, this does not always occur.

Think for a moment about behavioral indicators of engagement in a conversation. Now consider how we might reassign these qualities to describe how students perceive faculty and their level of engagement while teaching their courses. For example, how do students know, inside and outside the classroom, whether faculty are engaged and connected with them and their learning?

Rodgers and Raider-Roth (2006) described this sense of connection between faculty and students as *presence*, which they defined 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. (p. 265)

The authors also cited the work of Nouwen (1986), who described presence as a form of *hospitality*:

... the creation of free space where the stranger can enter and become a friend instead of an enemy. Hospitality is not to change people, but to offer them space where change can take place. It is



“Your true home is in the here and the now.”

— **Thich Nhat Hanh,**
Vietnamese Buddhist monk, peace activist, and author

not to bring men and women over to our side, but to offer freedom not disturbed by dividing lines. (p. 55)

Whether teaching in a classroom or online, faculty should strive to invite students into the process of learning, where mistakes can be made and explorations of content can be celebrated through a collaborative relationship.

A rich body of interdisciplinary literature (e.g., psychology, religion, philosophy, education) examines the concept of presence. The common denominator in these explorations is an invitation for faculty to move beyond simply being the “expert in the room” and the primary purveyor of knowledge to the role of an active partner focusing on the needs of students. Faculty members, as part of this process, can communicate their presence in a variety of ways (e.g., words, actions, dispositions). Rodgers and Raider-Roth, in an effort to make the concept of presence more observable and practical, delineated four components directly related to teaching in higher education: (a) self-awareness, (b) connection to students, (c) connection to subject matter, and (d) pedagogical knowledge. In this issue of *The Toolbox*, we will examine each of these components of presence, along with potential ways to bring them to life in our role as instructors.

Self-awareness refers to the level of faculty members’ ongoing knowledge of the things they do well in teaching and those that could be improved. Here are some strategies for enhancing self-awareness:

- Make the effort to regularly reflect on personal teaching practices (e.g., individual class sessions, resources, discussions, online engagements, assessments) and the types of responses they elicit from students.
- Invite a trusted colleague to drop in and observe one or more scheduled classes. These informal observations could focus on teacher–student engagement and the evidence of presence on the part of the faculty member, for example. After each observation, discuss with your colleague what was seen and experienced in the classroom. Such exchanges typically result in great insights and a clear direction for improvement.
- Arrange to observe your colleagues as they teach. Look for things others do to bond and connect with their students.

Connection to students refers to how a faculty member communicates and engages with students inside and outside the classroom. Strategies to boost this connection include:

- Scheduling time before and after class simply devoted to being available for students (e.g., questions, concerns, informal conversation), if possible.
- Requiring students to schedule a one-on-one conversation to discuss the course and what they are learning. These sessions build relationships, as faculty and students also tend to share parts of their personal stories (e.g., decisions to pursue a certain major, post-graduation plans and expectations). Obviously, this cannot be done in every class, every semester, so faculty might, for example, choose a course that is part of their academic major or where several students in the class are part of their advising load.
- Using a variety of tools to connect with students outside the classroom, including
 - being available by phone through an office number or, if faculty choose, a personal cellphone number;



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- providing notifications and opportunities for dialogue through a variety of free, web-based tools (e.g., WhatsApp, Google Voice, Remind Me) if faculty do not wish to share their cellphone number;
- emailing to communicate concern about individual student progress or share words of affirmation and encouragement for a job well done;
- arranging synchronous video sessions to provide additional assistance on course-related skills or to simply converse about important course content; and
- embedding videos into the learning management system that include highlights and summarize upcoming content and assignments.

Connection to subject matter refers to how conversant and passionate faculty are about their academic discipline, including current trends and issues. When thinking about this connection, remember:

- Students appreciate faculty members who are passionate about what they teach. What are some ways to alert students to your personal passion and ever-expanding interest in the content of your courses?
- In every academic discipline, current events can be connected directly to course content. Find ways to make these connections (e.g., TED Talks, discussion questions, video clips from the news) to make course content more relevant. When faculty make an effort to find these resources and connect to the real world, they demonstrate presence in a powerful way.

Pedagogical knowledge refers to an awareness of multiple tools that can be seamlessly embedded and aligned with the instructional process. Strategies for faculty to enhance this knowledge include:

- staying up-to-date on research and trends in their academic discipline. At the same time, faculty should devote time to thinking about how to effectively teach that content in a powerful manner.
- attending at least one workshop or seminar per year that focuses on teaching and learning practices.
- taking advantage of discipline-specific professional journals that contain articles on innovative ways to teach.

Through words and actions, strive to be present for your students.

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- Nouwen, H. J. M. (1986). *Reaching out: Three movements of the spiritual life*. New York, NY: Doubleday.
- Rodgers, C. R., & Raider-Roth, M. B. (2006). Presence in teaching. *Teachers and Teaching: Theory and Practice*, 12(3), 265-287. [doi:10.1080/13450600500467548](https://doi.org/10.1080/13450600500467548)

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Length: Original articles should be no longer than 1,500 words. The editor reserves the right to edit submissions for length.

Please address all questions and submissions to:

Brad Garner, Toolbox Editor
Indiana Wesleyan University
1900 West 50th Street
Marion, IN 46953
Email: brad.garner@indwes.edu
Phone: 765-677-3341

About The Toolbox

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