Cultivating the Virtue of Teacher Presence in Transformative Education: Inspirations from the Spiritual Writings of John Baptist De La Salle

Abstract:

This paper highlights the importance of teacher presence in transformative learning, particularly in the context of schooling for young people. Specifically, it retrieves the prophetic mysticism in the spiritual writings of John Baptist De La Salle in the 17th century, and considers its contemporary relevance as a spiritual foundation for teacher presence, nurturing an ethical vision of teaching in light of Christian faith. Through the lens of Lasallian spirituality, I discuss how Robert Starratt’s triple articulation of presence as affirming, enabling, and critical may be spiritually deepened through cultivating an awareness of God as (a) present in the young, as (b) providential presence for the young, and as (c) just presence with the poor accordingly.

Introduction

“Let us remember we are in the Holy Presence of God” - this was a maxim that we began with every morning at assembly prayer in the Lasallian secondary school in Singapore where I was educated. Another maxim that the school adopted as a theme during my junior year, and it has since then become a popular philosophy that informs my educational practice, was “Learning how to learn.” As I reflect on the possible connections between these two maxims, an aspect of Lasallian schooling that strikes me as memorable has been my experience of teachers who embodied a certain presence as they carried out their professional commitments. How might this sense of teacher presence be characterized, and in what ways is this connected to the Lasallian tradition of Catholic schooling? This paper as such considers how Lasallian spirituality attends to the cultivation of teacher presence in companioning young people today to ‘learn how to learn,’ which, to me, serves as a shorthand for transformative learning.

This paper will do two things. First, it explains the core dynamics of transformative learning (TL) but with a focus to situate the importance of teacher presence, particularly in the context of schooling for young people, where the role of teachers is perhaps more pronounced as companioning adolescents to grow into a habit of reflecting critically and acting responsibly. It is in light of teachers’ accompaniment with young people that I highlight the importance of what Robert Starratt (2012: 121) calls “the virtue of presence.”1 Second, this paper re-frames this “virtue of presence” through the lens of Lasallian spirituality, drawing on John Baptist De La Salle’s Meditations for the Time of Retreat and the Meditations for Sundays and Feasts.2 Though

2 These sources are published in a single anthology as John Baptist De La Salle, Meditations by John Baptist de La Salle, trans. Richard Armandez, FSC, and Augustine Loes, FSC, ed. Augustine Loes, FSC, and Francis Huether, FSC (Landover, Md.: Lasallian Publications, 1994). Specific references to De La Salle’s are hereafter cited in text as M, followed by the meditation number and section standardized in the anthology.
written in the 17th century, his spiritual writings, I argue, continue to be relevant to teachers today because of their emphasis on a critical contemplative stance toward education, which in turn cultivates the prophetic dimension of teacher presence.

“Learning how to learn”: Dynamics of Transformative Learning (TL) and the Importance of Teacher Presence

Through the theoretical lens of transformative learning, learning how to learn is first recognizing the educational process as engaging a complex dynamic of meaning making. Jack Mezirow, who introduced the concept of transformative learning in adult education, speaks of meaning making in terms of a re-visioning and enlargement of one’s “frame of reference,” which is “the structure of assumptions and expectations through which we filter sense impressions.” The presumption here is that “how we see the world is a result of our perceptions of our experiences,” and so the process of transformative learning aims to make explicit for ourselves the multiple lenses with which we interpret and order the meaning of our lives. Learning is value-laden. A central element in transformative learning, then, is critical reflection that challenges learners to name and assess the validity of those values, beliefs, and assumptions that are taken-for-granted in their frames of reference, “mak[ing] them more inclusive, discriminating, open, emotionally capable of change, and reflective … to guide action.”

According to Mezirow, critical reflection in transformative learning is facilitated by discourse, which is “the process in which we have an active dialogue with others to better understand the meaning of an experience.” Seen in this light, learning how to learn calls for a sense of community and demands a dialogical spirit of collaboration between teachers and students as learners on a journey.

This journey is a movement toward self-actualization, which presumes the freedom and autonomy of human beings to make personal choices. “Transformation Theory’s focus is on how we learn to negotiate and act on our own purposes, values, feelings, and meanings rather than those we have uncritically assimilated from others – to gain greater control over our lives as socially responsible, clear-thinking decision makers.” The accent is placed here on recognizing and growing into “a sense of responsible agency” in the context of relationships that are always situated within wider patterns of power shaped by culture, socioeconomic structures and ideologies. Theorists and practitioners after Mezirow have taken up this social dimension of transformative learning and highlighted its emancipatory potential. Stephen Brookfield goes as far to argue that reflection is distinctively critical in fostering transformative learning only when

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6 Ibid., 14.
8 Mezirow, “Learning to Think Like an Adult,” 8.
9 Ibid., 8.
it engages in “ideology critique.”\[^{10}\] By this, he means challenging hegemonic practices in order to uncover and imagine alternative ways of being that are otherwise silenced and marginalized.\[^{11}\] Laurent A. Parks Daloz emphasizes the connection between transformative learning and social responsibility that builds on a “capacity to identify one’s own sense of self with the well-being of all life.”\[^{12}\] In particular, he calls for “a constructive engagement with otherness.”\[^{13}\] What he means by this is that we learn to perceive our encounters with difference not as threat, but as opportunities for ongoing dialogue to seek understanding and build bridges for the “common good.”\[^{14}\] From this emancipatory dimension of transformative learning, learning how to learn is developing a critical awareness of our mutual responsibility towards one another, fostering a raised consciousness that informs our convictions to work toward social change.

The literature on TL underscores the ethical nature of learning. That is, the good of learning is not simply the transmission of knowledge from somewhere ‘out there.’ Rather, the good is found in the critical ‘sorting-out’ and interiorization of what is known so as to know and enact one’s situated position as agent within the social world s/he inhabits with others. The realization of agency paradoxically stems from our recognition as vulnerable inter-dependent social beings bound in responsive relations of co-creative responsibility. This ethical nature of learning necessarily implicates teaching as an intrinsically ethical practice.\[^{15}\] Yet, the role of educators (and school teachers in particular) seems to be sidelined in the literature on TL following Mezirow, perhaps because Mezirow first developed his theory on transformative learning for adult education.\[^{16}\] Contrary to Mezirow, I see TL as an ongoing process throughout life. Given my interest in this paper on teaching young people in schools, a more significant issue would be the distinctive place of adolescence in relation to the process of transformative learning. The question, then, is how we ought to begin to introduce the process of transformative learning for adolescents. What would help young people learn about learning how to learn in the context of schooling?

In light of this question, I suggest that teachers play a more pronounced role in schools as companionship adults who support and challenge young people to recognize and navigate the social and cultural world of values in which they find themselves, encouraging them to ask questions and to be attentive to the impact of their actions on others. The quality of teacher presence is integral to their work of accompaniment such that the school is not only an agent of socialization, but also a social ethical force that positions young people to see that their lives do in fact matter for the transformation of their everyday realities. Starratt speaks about presence as


\[^{11}\] Ibid., 138.


\[^{13}\] Ibid., 110.

\[^{14}\] Ibid., 109-112.

\[^{15}\] Starratt, Cultivating an Ethical School, 108.

\[^{16}\] Mezirow, “Learning to Think Like an Adult,” 26. Mezirow writes, “Although adolescents may learn to become critically reflective of the assumptions of others, becoming critically reflective of one’s own assumptions appears to be much more likely to occur in adults.” It is beyond the scope of this paper to evaluate critically his methodological move to delimit critical self-reflection as a distinctively adult capacity. For a view that broadens TL to include the whole life span, see Robert Kegan, “What “Form” Transforms? – A Constructivist-Developmental Approach to Transformative Learning,” in Learning as Transformation: Critical Perspectives on a Theory in Progress, ed. Jack Mezirow & Associates (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000).
a virtue that facilitates teaching as an ethical practice.\textsuperscript{17} According to him, there are three senses to this “virtue of presence”\textsuperscript{18} – affirming presence, enabling presence, and critical presence:

Affirming presence accepts the person or the event as it is, in its ambiguity, its particularity, its multidimensionality. Enabling presence is open to the possibilities of the person or event to contain or reveal something special, something of deep value and significance. Critical presence expects to find both negative and positive features in persons and events. People and events and circumstances reveal unequal relationships of power and reciprocity. Critical presence brings to light what is tacit, assumed, or presumed in situations that reflect human constructions and beliefs.\textsuperscript{19}

Starratt’s discussion on presence, however, is narrowly framed as the learner’s dialogical engagement with study material.\textsuperscript{20} To the extent that teaching is “virtuous practice,”\textsuperscript{21} his notion of presence can and ought to be extended to include the teacher’s way of being with students in the learning process. In the next section, I reframe Starratt’s three senses of presence – affirming, enabling, and critical – through the lens of Lasallian spirituality, which serves to nourish an ethical vision of teaching in light of faith.

\textit{“Let us remember we are in the Holy Presence of God”: Lasallian Spirituality and the Cultivation of Teacher Presence}

A French priest and theologian, John Baptist De La Salle founded the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools in 1680. In 1950, fifty years after his canonization, he was declared the patron saint of all teachers of youth. De La Salle’s writings articulated an educational mission that demonstrated a preferential option not only for the poor, but also for children (more specifically boys) through gratuitous schools in France.\textsuperscript{22} In this section, I offer a reading of De La Salle’s spiritual writings with a focus on how they contribute to a contemporary Christian spirituality for educators in cultivating what Starratt has described as the “virtue of presence” that inspires not only the process of transformative learning, but also creates an environment that facilitates a habit of learning how to learn.

My analysis will draw on two sources: \textit{Meditations for the Time of Retreat} and the \textit{Meditations for Sundays and Feasts}. Written sometime after 1707 and before De La Salle’s death in 1719, \textit{Meditations for the Time of Retreat} is a centerpiece in Lasallian spirituality in that its sixteen pieces encapsulate De La Salle’s faith journey with an intent to have the Brothers and, by extension, lay Christian educators, reflect and “discover their spiritual, charismatic identity in the

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{17} Starratt, \textit{Cultivating an Ethical School}, 121. Starratt identifies three virtues integral to the ethical work of teaching and learning: “the virtue of presence, the virtue of authenticity, and the virtue of responsibility.” This paper focuses on presence.
  \item \textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 121.
  \item \textsuperscript{19} Ibid., 122.
  \item \textsuperscript{20} Ibid., 121.
  \item \textsuperscript{21} Ibid., 114.
  \item \textsuperscript{22} For a historical biography of De La Salle’s faith journey in establishing the work of the Christian Brothers in France, see Luke Salm, FSC, \textit{The Work is Yours: The Life of Saint John Baptist de La Salle} (Romeoville, Illinois: Christian Brothers Publications, 1989). Salm writes, “For De La Salle and the Brothers gratuity of instruction was a fundamental principle. This not only provided a quality education for the poor, but also guaranteed that no distinction would be made in the school between those who could afford to pay and those who could not.” (p. 57)
\end{itemize}
roots of their calling.”

Similarly, *Meditations for Sundays and Feasts*, though originally published and distributed among the Brothers after De La Salle’s death, offer for us today a spiritual vision that integrates practical directives for educators, highlighting in particular their ethical commitments to the poor and the young.

What I want to highlight is the critical contemplative stance toward pedagogy in Lasallian spirituality. For De La Salle, spirituality is not an add-on or mere enhancer to the art of education. Rather, teaching *is* spiritual; it is “divine work,” according to Lasallian scholar George Van Grieken. This does not mean that teachers are to lord over their students as demi-gods. Rather, as “cooperators with Jesus Christ” (M.195), they are to be mindful of the power they have been given not to hurt but to heal, as well as to be attentive to the activity of God’s Spirit in the educational process. Theologian and Lasallian scholar Michel Sauvage has described this critical contemplative stance in De La Salle’s writings as “mystical realism.” As he explains, De La Salle’s source of spirituality is in “the lived experience of God, but an experience that is reinterpreted, reconstructed and relocated in the context of the history of salvation.” Sauvage outlines a four-fold rhythm to this mystical realism:

1. Consider the concrete teaching situation.
2. Contemplate the element of mystery involved within it.
3. Make a renewed commitment to transform the present reality.
4. Be open to the transcendent and freely given Ultimate.

In practice, this four-fold rhythm is more iterative and cyclical rather than linear. What is worth retrieving here in De La Salle’s writings is a prophetic mysticism that spiritually grounds the virtuous practice of teacher presence for transformative educational praxis. Lasallian spirituality calls teachers to remember that God is relationally encountered as Presence in the everyday of educational activity as co-creatorship with God’s Spirit, walking with the young on the journey of discipleship.

At the heart of Lasallian spirituality, then is an awareness of the connectedness between God, teachers, and students in the school as a faith community wherein the process of transformative learning happens. It is in being mindful of and living into this connectedness that teachers cultivate an educational presence, which in turn reflects God’s presence in schooling. Starratt’s triple articulation of presence as affirming, enabling, and critical may be spiritually deepened through cultivating an awareness of God as (a) present in the young, as (b) providential presence for the young, and as (c) just presence with the poor and socially marginalized accordingly.

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27 Ibid., 7.

28 Ibid., 5.

29 De La Salle frequently refers to children as “disciples” in his *Meditations* (e.g. M 195.1, 196.1, 198.2)
a) Affirming Presence through an Awareness of God as Present in the Young

Through the lens of Lasallian spirituality, affirming presence is cultivated through an awareness of the human dignity of the young as created in the image and likeness of God. A dominant metaphor in De La Salle’s writings is that of “touching hearts,” which characterizes the fundamentally relational nature of education. In his meditation on Saint Peter as a model of faith for educators, De La Salle wrote:

Do you have a faith that is such that it is able to touch the hearts of your students and inspire them with the Christian spirit? This is the greatest miracle you could perform and the one that God asks of you, for this is the purpose of your work. (M 139.3)

The young, then, are also “a letter which Jesus Christ dictates to you, which you write each day in their hearts, not with ink, but by the Spirit of the living God, who acts in you and by you through the power of Jesus Christ” (M 195.2). From the standpoint of this relational pedagogy of the heart, transformation takes place from within and between persons who come to see each other in their complex wholeness. As such, affirming presence orients an educator to pay personal attention to each young person as a unique child of God, and in doing so creates the conditions for the classroom to be a trustworthy space for transformative learning. Such a trustworthy space that allows for the vulnerability of learners also demands discipline.

In encouraging teachers to seek out metaphors of “respectful discipline” that allows for an authentic manner of relating with students, Rachel Kessler writes: “Knowing that their vulnerability will be respected and protected, both teachers and students can begin to open their hearts, to connect deeply with themselves and one another, and risk bringing their full humanity to the classroom.”

Lasallian spirituality is helpful in this regard as it grounds discipline within an ethic of care that recognizes the dignity of the young. While some may find De La Salle’s language of reproofs and corrections to be austere and paternalistic, this would be to overlook his insistence on guiding the young with “gentleness,” “patience” and “prudence” (M 203.2). De La Salle asserts that “[t]he first thing to which we must pay attention is not to undertake reproofs and corrections except under the guidance of the Spirit of God” (M 204.1). He further emphasizes, “We must reprove and correct with justice, by helping the children to recognize the wrong they have done, and what correction the fault they have committed deserves, and we must try to have them accept it” (M 204.1). As Van Grieken notes of De La Salle’s approach to discipline, “Instead of putting the burden on the children, it is the teachers who must look at how they make themselves or their actions unbearable to those entrusted to their care.”

Underscored, then, are the principles of justice, charity and kindness that affirm young people as being “endowed with reason and must not be corrected like animals, but like reasonable persons” (M 204.1). Lasallian spirituality cultivates an affirming presence that holds in tension the vulnerability of young people with their capacity for moral agency.

b) Enabling Presence through an Awareness of God as Providential Presence for the Young

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Enabling presence is being open and tending to the surprising possibilities that young people bring. Lasallian spirituality frames the enabling presence of educators within a dual dynamic of faith and zeal in light of God’s providence. Now, when we speak about Lasallian spirituality, we cannot separate it from De La Salle’s profound experience of God as Providence, not in the abstract but as a life force working concretely within and with him. As De La Salle wrote upon retrospection of his work in Christian education:

It was undoubtedly for this reason that God, Who guides all things with wisdom and serenity, Whose way it is not to force the inclinations of persons, willed to commit me entirely to the development of the schools. He [sic] did this in an imperceptible way and over a long period of time so that one commitment led to another in a way that I did not foresee in the beginning.32

It was this trust in divine providence that sustained De La Salle’s educational mission. His experience of a God who guided him gently and with wisdom had also shaped his vision of educators as trustworthy guides and mentors, walking the way of transformation with the young as a gradual process, in faith and zeal. In the Lasallian tradition, then, faith disposes teachers to trust in a God who generously provides. Such is a faith that orients educators to contemplate on the wideness of God’s goodness, and to bring it forth in the students they encounter in concrete experience. Zeal is the lived expression of faith that compels educators to embody God’s love for all in ways that the young can recognize and practice. As Van Grieken puts it, “Without zeal, faith had no substance, and without faith, zeal had no purpose.”33

The accent here is on role modeling. As De La Salle notes, “Your zeal for the children you instruct would not go very far and would not have much result or success if it limited itself only to words. To make it effective it is necessary that your example support your instructions, and this is one of the main signs of your zeal” (M 202.3). What this means for initiating young people into the journey of transformative learning is that educators ought to walk through it themselves by modeling “qualities of intellectual curiosity, tolerance for ambiguity, and intellectual and social humility.”34

Lasallian spirituality thus frames the enabling presence of teachers as witnessing to a spirit of faith and zeal that challenges educators to become simultaneously learners with their students, and model an openness of heart that is essential for critical reflection.

c) Critical Presence through an Awareness of God’s Just Presence with the Poor and Socially Marginalized

Critical presence is engagement with social realities in all their contradictions with a mindfulness of how power shapes relationships. Lasallian spirituality cultivates an educator’s critical presence with a social sensitivity that is mission-oriented toward educating the poor.35

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33 George Van Grieken, FSC., Touching the Hearts of Students: Characteristics of Lasallian Schools (Landover, MD: Christian Brothers Publications, 1999), 74.
recurrent theme in De La Salle’s writings is a concern for the social abandonment of the young due to poverty:

Consider that it is a practice only too common for the working class and the poor to allow their children to live on their own, roaming all over like vagabonds as long as they are not able to put them to some work; these parents have no concern to send their children to school because their poverty does not allow them to pay teachers, or else, obliged to look for work outside their homes, they have to abandon their children to themselves […] God has had the goodness to remedy so great a misfortune by the establishment of the Christian Schools. (M 194.1)

Underscored here is the prophetic dimension of Lasallian spirituality that works toward educational justice, revealing God’s solidarity with the poor and socially marginalized. The Christian Schools, for De La Salle, had been established out of God’s Providence for the poor. As he also writes in his meditation on the Feast of the Epiphany:

Recognize Jesus beneath the poor rags of the children whom you have to instruct. Adore him in them. Love poverty and honor the poor after the example of the Magi, for poverty should be dear to you who are responsible for the instruction of the poor. May faith lead you to do this with affection and zeal, because the children are the members of Jesus Christ. In this way this divine Savior will be pleased with you, and you will find him, because he always loved the poor and poverty. (M 96.3)

What is expressed here is not only a preferential option for the poor, but also for the young who belong to God through Christ.

The mission-oriented nature of Lasallian spirituality is further embedded in its language of reconciliation to characterize the task of education. De La Salle frequently speaks of teachers as “ambassadors and ministers of Jesus Christ” (M 195.2). The genius of De La Salle lies in his creative adaption of Pauline language to articulate a Christian spirituality for teachers:

Since God according to the expression of the same Apostle [Paul], has made you his ministers in order to reconcile them to him and he has entrusted to you for this purpose the word of reconciliation for them, exhort them, then, as if God were exhorting them through you, for you have been destined to cultivate these young plants by announcing to them the truths of the Gospel, and to procure for them the means of salvation appropriate to their development. (M 193.3)

There is a tendency to privatize this language of reconciliation to an individual’s relationship with God. However, in its commitment toward social justice, Lasallian spirituality opens up a space for the meaning of reconciliation to be imagined socially, such that care for the young is also paying critical attention to communal structures that oppress or liberate them.

Seen through the lens of Lasallian spirituality, the educator is being critically present when s/he engages in the work of social transformation by tending to the wounds of young people inflicted socially at the intersection of exclusionary structures such as classism, racism, sexism, homo- and trans-phobia. If transformative learning aims to cultivate the agency of young people, critical presence demands that educators be vigilant of how they might be complicit in perpetuating institutional structures in their curriculum and pedagogical practices that unjustly obscure and diminish the humanity of the young. Lasallian spirituality therefore cultivates an
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al vision of schooling that is concerned with the well-being of young people not only as
individuals, but also as creative beings whose human flourishing as agents is situated and
communally negotiated within a configuration of structural relations that involves power. Critical
presence, then, obliges teachers to reflect on how they are using power responsibly to engage
youth participation in resisting and transforming structures that keep communities in
dehumanizing situations of impoverishment. From the perspective of faith, this mandate is rooted
in and sustained by a spiritual awareness of God’s just and creative presence with the poor and
socially marginalized.

Conclusion

In reviewing the dynamics of transformative learning, I have highlighted the importance
of teacher presence, particularly in relation to young people in schools. Teacher presence, as
Kessler understands it, is a “way of being in the world of the classroom … [which] will
ultimately determine how safe and open students will feel when we invite them to explore deep
matters.”36 In other words, with regard to transformative learning, the quality of teacher presence
plays an important part in creating a trustworthy environment conducive for young people to
begin to grow in a habit of critical reflection. Starratt reframes presence as a virtue integral to
teaching as an ethical practice that shapes individuals as relational beings who belong in
communities. Where this paper hopes to make a contribution is to interpret this virtue of teacher
presence through the lens of Lasallian spirituality. The spiritual writings of John Baptist De La
Salle offer a critical contemplative stance to education, which, I suggest, is productive for
nourishing and deepening an ethical vision of teaching. What is particularly evocative in De La
Salle’s works that ought to be reclaimed for contemporary educators is his practice of prophetic
mysticism in education. He writes:

You must, then, devote yourself very much to prayer in order to succeed in your ministry.
You must constantly represent the needs of your disciples to Jesus Christ, explaining to
him the difficulties you have experienced in guiding them. Jesus Christ, seeing that you
regard him as the one who can do everything in your work and yourself as an instrument
that ought to be moved only by him, will not fail to grant you what you ask of him.
(M.196.1)

De La Salle’s point here is not only highlighting the importance of prayer as sustenance in the
ministry of teaching. In my view, he is articulating a more radical view of teaching as prayer;
that is, the teacher embodies a contemplative presence that incarnates the life of God’s Spirit.

So let us remember we are in the Holy Presence of God. Being present to the young is
also calls us to be present before a generous God who invites, inspires, and transforms us from
within. It is to remember there is nothing outside of God’s being-in-relation with us through
Christ and in the power of the Spirit. Ultimately, Lasallian spirituality frames the virtue of
teacher presence as witness to the Gospel that celebrates the radical outreach of God’s inclusive
love through the incarnation of Christ, who first came to us as a child. This Gospel is announced
to all, and its privileged hearers the poor and the young.

36 Kessler, “Soul of Students, Soul of Teachers,” 118.
Bibliography


