

# *Being Present to Students: How Holistic Educators Communicate Presence*

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## **Abstract**

Holistic educators restore the heart of education by communicating presence to their students through interpersonal communication practices that draw out their students' wholeness: teaching as a conversation, purposefully pausing, emphasizing experiential learning, treating their students as equal partners in learning, offering students full attention, empathically listening, sensing and responding to students' emotion, and channeling wisdom. Findings from qualitative interviews with six experienced holistic educators suggest presence is multidimensional, reflecting interconnected yet distinct concepts: soulfulness, being present, and communicating for communion. Soulfulness means being in connection with one's soul, the internal awareness of the state of one's being or consciousness which is developed through life experiences, learning from their teachers, and daily contemplative practices. Mindfully being present means bringing soulfulness into the moment with the wholeness of another person through holistic communication practices. Communicating for communion occurs when the souls of the student and teacher meet which is transformational for both.

**Keywords:** *presence, holistic, educators, communion, communication*

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Jiddha Krishnamurti (1953), one of the foundational thinkers of the holistic education movement, explains how much of modern schooling comes out of a background of objectivism and industrialism which place value in efficiency of quantity, speed, and economy. Children's minds were seen as an "intellectual capital" or a material to support the economy (R. Miller, 1991). The *holistic education* movement was a response that theorized a pedagogical model

which emphasized the importance of considering the needs of students' and teachers' whole being—mind, body, and spirit—in education (R. Miller, 1991; J. P. Miller, 2019b). A prominent pioneer in the holistic education movement, John P. Miller (2006), wrote, "The presence that the teacher displays is fundamental to teaching. In fact, if we recall the teachers who have had an impact on us, it is often not the material that they taught

that we remember but that presence which somehow touched us deeply” (p. 81).

Considering how holistic educators are present to students, the communication between educator and student comes into focus, including communication emphasizing the spirituality of the educator, the student, and the relation between them. Recent conceptualization of interality/interology, the relational space in between people, in the communication discipline considers what emerges through communicative processes (Shang, 2015; Zhang, 2015). Care for the relational space between people is enacted through internal and external communication behaviors and suggests an entry point for exploring how holistic educators communicate presence with and to their students. Ucock (2007; 2006) writes about speaking and listening to others when one is mindful in the present moment. Denton and Ashton with their colleagues explore the many ways that spirit enters the classroom, communicating with and through students and teachers (Denton & Ashton, 2004; Ashton & Denton, 2006). Goodall (1993) considers communication as spirit made manifest, drawing on Thich Nhat Han’s concept of *interbeing*. Clark (2020) builds on the notion of interbeing and explores communicating as though we were connected by a spiritual web of interbeing. Clark and Stratton-Smith (2022) present an exemplar of contemplative communication behaviors where those in conversation come alongside each other, and together are present to Presence. This consideration of communication as spiritual provides a lens through which to consider holistic educators and their students that highlights presence.

So, what is this deeply meaningful teacher’s presence and, more importantly, how does the teacher embody this presence with their students? Nancy Rosenow (2012) calls for teachers to risk being free in expressing their authenticity when

working with students to help them accept and express their own uniqueness. Denton (1998) explored experientially how turning one’s attention inward in meditation leads to feeling a deep connection to the heart which unites mind, body, and spirit. Denton describes this perceptual shift or awakening of the heart as a presence which has the power to change the world around or within us. This approach assumes that within each of us is a spiritual dimension where we are interconnected with all of life, including other people. Presence may be tuning into that dimension and living from that consciousness on a regular basis, especially in our interpersonal relationships such as between teacher and student. When a holistic educator embodies presence in this way, it can be seen as a sort of communication which brings a sense of spirituality to the learning environment that is often left out of education. This communication of a teacher’s presence may have an impact on students such as creating a safe space to connect with their own spirituality in a deeply meaningful way.

While presence is mentioned across a variety of fields, the communicative facets that constitute presence are largely unstudied. The research focus for this paper is the communication practices holistic educators use to be present with students. This paper considers the findings from a study exploring how holistic educators cultivated the capacity to be present to themselves and their students, and how educators’ communication practices can create a space to bring deeper wisdom, meaning, and purpose into the learning environment for the transformation of mind, body and spirit of both the teacher and student (Karas, 2021).

## Literature Review

### Presence in Pedagogy

The interaction between educator and student in the present moment of the learning context is central to holistic pedagogy. J. P. Miller (2006) refers to this as timeless learning, saying, “Most of us have had the experience of the timeless moment. We feel we are in unbounded space. It is in timeless moments when powerful learning occurs” (p. 4). Glazer (1999) describes how living in the present moment, aware of its qualities is key to introducing spirituality in education. Awareness in the present moment empowers one to make a choice of what meaning it has and to act based on that meaning. Living in this way one is fully present not only to the external world but also to one’s internal wisdom (Tolle, 1999). Other authors suggest this way of living connects teachers to their internal wisdom and brings a depth of sincerity, authenticity, and wholeness to their relationships with students (Greene & Kim, 2019; Greene & Kim, 2018; Korthagen & Verkuyl, 2002; Palmer, 1998).

Holistic educators Green and Kim (2018), among others, draw from a concept borrowed from the worldview of Pacific cultures, the *va*, which is “like the breath of life in a classroom, it animates all that happens among everyone present” (p. 103). Wendt (1996) says, “*Va* is the space between, the betweenness, not empty space, not space that separates but space that relates, that holds separate entities and things together in the Unity-that-is-All, the space that is context, giving meaning to things... A well-known Samoan expression is ‘*la teu le va*.’ Cherish/nurture/care for the *va*, the relationships” (p. 18). Anae (2016) explains that *teu le va* is a Samoan relational ethic in which careful attention to the relational spaces between people allows for the sacred to be tended. *Soulful* is how holistic educators describe a connection to the well of energy deep within the

self. J. P. Miller (2006) writes that soul is the quality which Thomas Moore and Emerson described as a mysterious energy that can deepen meaning and purpose in life. Miller believes bringing soulfulness to the classroom can give students a deeper awareness of their place in the larger scheme of things and happens when the presence of the teacher connects with the soul of the student. This takes education deeper than just focusing on acquiring skills or sharing information. When a teacher is present with their students, they connect more fully by drawing something deeper out of the students which is transformative. Duerr et al. (2003) conducted a survey of transformative and spiritual dimensions in higher education and found that transformative learning is a process of personal and community growth that leads to reducing the individual ego and a sense of communion among people. This occurs through the connection of student and teacher in a transformative way, which may be observed in communication behaviors associated with presence.

### Communication Practices for Presence

Communication behaviors which a teacher practices while demonstrating presence in the classroom are mentioned in holistic education, spiritual education, and contemplative studies, but the focus on communication is rarely fully developed. Four clusters of communication behaviors that are relevant for enacting presence in holistic pedagogy are the practices of immediacy, silence, mindful listening, and empathic listening.

#### *Teacher immediacy and student learning*

Practices that convey a sense of psychological closeness are often referred to by communication scholars as *immediacy* behaviors. Christophel (1990) explains that immediacy refers to a psychological sense of closeness, and that teachers

who display nonverbal immediacy behaviors are evaluated positively by students, and therefore students are more likely to be engaged in the course, so teachers can instruct more effectively. Some examples of immediacy are nonverbal behaviors such as smiling, making eye contact, nodding, not speaking in a monotonous voice, walking around the classroom, touching appropriately, and having an open and relaxed body language (Anderson, 1979; Gorham, 1988). Instructor immediacy is shown to provide significant positive effects in the classroom—students often report more positive classroom experiences, complain less, have reduced communication apprehension, feel affective support, and rank the teacher higher (Moore et al., 1996). Most importantly, teacher immediacy can engage students who otherwise would be disengaged, thus creating a learning environment that can help students to connect more fully with the content.

### ***Silence***

Holistic educators let there be periods of *silence* when communicating with students to allow for the wisdom of students to emerge (Johannesen, 1974; Schultz, 2010). Teachers who are present see their students more fully and allowing time for positive silence means the students' and teacher's wisdom can emerge from within each of them and into their learning together. Parker Palmer (1998) suggests pausing for silence in moments when something moving occurs to acknowledge that moment in time, noting silence allows everyone present to go within and raise their self-awareness.

### ***Mindful Listening***

Wolvin and Coakley (1996) explain that orally communicated messages require both the sending and receiving of messages and therefore listening can be understood as one of the key skills in

establishing meaningful oral communication. Holistic educators listen mindfully and help their students become mindful, too (Ucok, 2006; 2007). For scholars in the field of contemplative education, *mindful listening* requires teachers to let go of their own thoughts about a situation and be fully present with what is being said by their students (Barbezat & Bush, 2014). Upon recognizing the full intent of a student's message, teachers do not jump to a quick answer but rather patiently listen before responding from a place of truly hearing. This being patient and listening fully and deeply is characteristic of presence. Jon Kabat-Zinn (2021) notes mindfulness offers the opportunity to "know ourselves in our wholeness and interconnectedness...and be able to act out of a larger wholeness" (p. 1558).

### ***Empathic Listening***

Bodie (2012) emphasizes that while listening has much to do with comprehension and competence, the interpersonal relationship in which it takes place suggests the active presence of another person who is acting empathically, signaling affection, support, empathy, and understanding. Myers (2000) conducted a study of clients engaged in therapy and compared therapists who listened empathically versus those who did not. The clients' experience of therapists who did not empathically listen made them feel misunderstood or not heard. In comparison, therapists who empathically listened created a safe space for client's self-exploration, encouraged clients to engage in the therapeutic process and made them feel that something essential was present which was missing from interpersonal encounters without empathic listening. Such experience of empathic listening may have similar effects in the realm of teaching and learning relevant to presence.

Whereas much of the contemplative, spiritual and holistic pedagogy research emphasizes the

importance of communication in the classroom to embody presence, it has not been fully studied in terms of how teachers' practice works to communicate presence to and with students. Therefore, the research question for this paper is: How do holistic educators embody presence through their communication practices with students?

### Methodology

A qualitative approach was taken to collect and analyze data to address the research question to reveal the lived experiences, viewpoints, and deeper meanings of holistic educators' presence with students in the classroom. Tracy (2013) suggests qualitative methods are helpful in studying situations where the researcher and those researched have a close relationship which allows for greater disclosure of relevant unknown material. *Typical instance sampling*, where participants are chosen because they are typical of the phenomenon under study, was used for this study to gain insight into how experienced holistic educators communicate presence (Tracy, 2013). *Qualitative respondent interviews* are "those that take place among social actors who all hold similar subject positions and have appropriate experiences, which attend to the research goals" (p. 141).

The holistic educators in this study are people who have demonstrated presence while serving as mentors for Kevin Karas in a variety of roles such as pastors, spiritual guides, coaches, and yoga teachers. He notes, "Simply being around them meant they each saw something deep within me and helped to bring it out. They brought out greater self-awareness of life purpose which was deeply meaningful." Seeking to understand how that was done and communicated to him as a student led to the choice of presence as the focus of this study. Six holistic educators met the criteria for participation: (1) An individual Kevin experienced as a student who demonstrated presence by having

left a meaningful impact on his life, personal development, academic interest in understanding presence, and a desire to become a holistic educator himself; (2) The individual currently or previously had a job as either an academic teacher, yoga teacher, meditation teacher, spiritual teacher, minister, life coach, counselor, or a related profession; (3) The individual received professional training that qualified them as an educator, counselor, or minister; and (4) The individual regularly engaged in contemplative practice. This last criterion is considered important because it is believed that contemplative practices are key preparatory activities toward teaching holistically. Participants ranged in age from 39 years to 76 years. Four identified as male and two as female.

A semi-structured interview guide approved by the university's institutional review board was used for the qualitative interviews and each participant signed a consent form and chose a pseudonym to ensure confidentiality. The audio recorded interviews were between 55 and 100 minutes long and transcribed in their entirety by the lead researcher. The transcripts were coded and then interpreted using an iterative approach informed by concepts from the literature as well as themes that emerged.

### Findings

This research will focus on how holistic educators communicate presence to students by providing a multidimensional definition and identifying the communication practices to do that (Karas, 2021, Karas & Clark, 2022). Before a holistic educator can be present to their students, they must be present to themselves, which the participants in this study achieved through daily contemplative practices and embodying the wisdom and practices of their own teachers (Karas, 2021). Their role-models, life experiences, and contemplative

practices all acted as forms of personal development awakening the presence in the teacher that then helped their students experience transformation. Nancy Rosenow (2012) emphasizes the importance of teachers deeply understanding, accepting, and celebrating themselves in order to be present with students authentically. Daily practices such as morning meditation, setting intentions, movement, and pre-class rituals all help the holistic educators in this study connect to their own soulfulness each day before they engage with students. This personal development ultimately led to a holistic educator's capacity for transcending the limitations of their ego or the course material by setting the intention to have a student-centered pedagogy which prioritized the student's experience while learning. These holistic educators' personal connection to the presence of their own souls expanded their capacity for being present to their students and connecting at the soulful level of communion with them.

### **Presence: Soulfulness, Being Present, and Communion**

These holistic educators sought to be present soulfully with their students and communicate for communion. Many scholars in the fields of holistic education (J.P. Miller, 1999, 2006, 2019a, 2019b; R. Miller, 1991), spirituality in education (Denton & Ashton, 2004), and contemplative pedagogies (Barbezat & Bush, 2014) suggest that a teacher's presence may be one of the most impactful solutions to address the issue of disconnection between teachers and students in the classroom. Interpretations of the research participants' interviews suggest that they consider presence as a multidimensional phenomenon. "Soulfulness," "being present," and "communication for communion" are terms used in this study to discuss interconnected yet distinct dimensions of

encounters between the holistic educators and their students in the classroom.

Anna, president of a nonprofit organization that has been running consciousness raising circles for over 20 years, says,

The goal is to be in contact with your own consciousness which then enables you to assist or invite the consciousness of the student to come forward.... You have to be able to delve into the experience of consciousness and then as you delve into the experience you have to, in a sense, be able to elicit that same experience within others.... What I try to elicit within all my students, [is] ... having a clarity of what I know to be true, first of all conceptually, and then second experientially, and then inviting the students to come to the same understanding and experience.

Kevin was in a consciousness raising circle led by Anna that used several spiritual texts as the basis for learning and discussion. Anna would present ideas based upon a paragraph in the text and students would notice what was evoked from within them. Anna would make space for questions and comments. If a student expressed what was evoked from within, then Anna would offer further conceptual framework in a way that helped students gain insights conceptually and experienced a shift to apply it in their life. The holistic impact for Kevin was to know himself more deeply in a way that alleviated personal suffering.

Along with Anna, the research participants suggested that presence can first be understood as soulfulness. *Soulfulness* means being in connection with one's soul, the internal awareness of the state of one's being or consciousness which is deeply personal, meaningful, and spiritual. The holistic educators in this study cultivated this through

engaging in a variety of contemplative practices as well as through various life experiences from the role modeling of their teacher's way of being. The wisdom they learned from these paragons' examples became the guiding light leading the way to embodying student-centered and experiential learning with their own students. Once in alignment with their own soulful, spiritual dimension of being, they then expanded their capacity for connecting with students

Second, mindfully *being present* is connecting to the soulfulness felt in the moment by focusing one's full attention on the here and now. Being present can also refer to holistic communication practices with another person, which include a dynamic process of perceiving the whole person by engaging in listening, witnessing nonverbal behavior, sensing the energy and emotion of another, and responding by meeting another where they are with deep presence, care, understanding and connection. In the sections that follow, we describe what this looks like in practice when holistic educators bring their own soulfulness into being present with students and it draws out the soul of the student(s) in communion/community in a way that is deeply impactful.

Third, when a holistic educator has connected with their own presence and is being present in the moment, then the student may feel seen in their wholeness and be empowered to transcend life's obstacles with greater awareness and clarity. Such deep connecting and unity flows from what is known as communion to holistic educators. J. P. Miller (2006) explains that communion occurs when the souls of two people connect whereas community is when the souls of more than two people connect as might happen in a classroom. Thus, *communion* is connecting at a soulful level of oneness with another which is transformational, in this case the presence of the teacher's being drawing forth and connecting with the presence of

the student. Holistic educators prepare for both communion and community, to be present to individual students, and also to all those present in a classroom. From the perspective of an individual student it may be communion, as in the case of the lead researcher, where the holistic educator attends fully to a student, while being present to a whole classroom of students may become community.

In summary, for these holistic educators, *soulfulness*, *being present*, and *communion* are practices of presence, connecting to one's own soul, being fully present in the moment interpersonally, and connecting at a level of oneness with the soul of the student in a transformational way. In this research, we are looking at presence in this multidimensional way to flesh out and better understand it by focusing on the communicative elements between holistic educators and students.

### ***Communicating for Communion***

Communicating for communion encapsulates the various soulful communication practices these holistic educators embodied which demonstrated presence and supported being present to students. For the research participants, communicating for communion included students feeling the transformative power of their teacher's presence embodied through specific interpersonal communication practices.

### **Darshan**

A metaphysical communication behavior which demonstrates transformative presence with students is referred to by participants as *darshan*. Darshan originates as a practice in Hindu spirituality in which gazing into a deity's or guru's eyes is a means of receiving transformation (Eck, 1998). As this practice spread transnationally (Ganguly, 2024), the term has been used to refer to

the transformative power of being in a teacher's presence. Larry, 73 years old, holding both an MBA and a MA in philosophy and comparative religion, teaches Interreligious Studies at a midwestern public university and has been teaching yoga and meditation for over 50 years. Larry says:

Darshan is to receive the presence of a powerful being. It's often used in a spiritual context, a spiritual being, someone who has developed the spiritual dimension of their life and you feel it. It is a feeling. Darshan is the shared feeling, feeling their presence. Being affected by that feeling, meaning that you feel the power and are changed as a result. You are changed by that meeting.

Darshan suggests how a holistic educator's presence is felt by students and impacts them in a transformational way as the energetic feeling students have of the authenticity of that holistic educator's being which is cultivated from the educator's life experiences and contemplative practices. Larry describes going to hear Bishop Desmond Tutu speak at a college auditorium. "He came into that room and he filled it just as soon as he walked in. I don't know what others felt but it just came over me like a tsunami on some level." Larry says because of this one small but transformational moment of experiencing the darshan of the presence of Desmond Tutu, he now considers him one of his main teachers.

Larry is a very charismatic teacher who shares universal wisdom through the use of stories that help students with challenges in their life outside the classroom. He often demonstrates immediacy through moving around the room and helping students one on one to get into yoga poses. A memorable moment for Kevin was when he had some challenging situations he was navigating in his life and Larry, recognizing it, walked around during the yoga class and approached him,

provided some touch to adjust his pose while also modeling and demonstrating how to do it with alignment. Larry then provided a story about life that went beyond what was happening in the class that helped provide some clarity to Kevin's life circumstances alleviating some of his emotional distress.

Holistic educators seeking to restore the soul of education understand that soulfulness needs to be cultivated first within themselves and then shared with students. Shanti, with a master's degree in curriculum studies, has completed both 200- and 300-hour yoga teacher training programs, and has been teaching for over 25 years. Kevin experienced Shanti as someone who embodied presence through joy, peacefulness, and love. As a student in her presence, her relaxed listening and authentic responses helped him feel that she really understood the heart of the matter under discussion. This helped Kevin, as her student, relax and be present with the content of the lesson.

Shanti described the moment when she entered a yoga class as a student and the teacher made eye contact with her. She felt a sense of presence that conveyed a feeling of non-judgment, love, and care. When asked further about how this and other impactful teachers were able to create this presence, she explained it was because they did the work to find it within themselves in order to share it with others. She believes that holistic educators can't fake it because if they do, they will likely be missing the embodiment of darshan, and students can tell. Students will miss having access to the energetic feeling of darshan which they receive in communion with their teachers by simply being in their presence. These holistic educators cultivated darshan from their engagement in contemplative practices on a regular basis as well as seeking out life experiences to develop their full being.

## **Interpersonal communication**

Holistic educators demonstrate communication for communion as a dynamic interpersonal communication approach for being present to students which restores the heart of education through accessing the social-emotional dimension of learning. The holistic educators in this study were very attuned to supporting the emotional and spiritual dimensions of education by following this interpersonal communication process for being present to students. After they engaged in contemplative practices to cultivate presence or soulfulness, they then embodied it interpersonally through certain communication practices to draw out their students' wholeness: teaching as conversation, purposefully pausing, experiential learning, equal partners in learning, full attention, empathic listening, sensing emotion, and channeling.

### ***Teaching as Conversation***

These holistic educators communicated for communion with an experiential approach to education which turns teaching into a conversation by getting real-time feedback and adjusting the class direction to meet students more fully in the present moment. Degrajpreet says, "I think seeing your students is really important... So, a conversation, it's a conversation when I teach." One way to do this is through observing nonverbal communication behavior from students such as "listening" to their body language. Degrajpreet developed this idea of turning teaching into a conversation from 23 years of experience in preschool special education working with children on the autism spectrum where she, "loved decoding their facial expressions, their body language, their posture, their vocalizations, like I loved decoding and kind of super sleuthing—'how are they feeling, what do they need, what was it really about' ... So, looking at people is super

critical, and having that conversation and being a good listener." In teaching as conversation, it is not necessarily listening only for verbal communication behavior but also students' nonverbal communication behavior, and responding based on both. Kevin experienced Degrajpreet as embodying this during a yoga class with many students where he was processing a life experience while in child's pose. Degrajpreet came over to him and provided some touch to assist him to go deeper into the pose, thus making him feel seen, supported, and cared for in the moment and able to let go of emotional attachments.

These holistic educators witnessed and listened to their students for verbal and nonverbal feedback regarding whether the student was engaged or not in the learning environment. Based on the feedback the teacher perceived, they were willing to be agile, flexible, and adaptable by adjusting their plan for the class to meet students where they were and engage them in the moment. These holistic educators turned teaching into a conversation where they were witnessing their students' reactions to the content and responding to engage the students more fully and holistically.

### ***Purposefully pausing***

A practical step for being present to students is applying a student-centered pedagogy of *purposefully pausing*. This is when holistic educators allow time to diverge from the classroom agenda to privilege the students' experience in the present moment. Larry said, "There is no one size fits all. You need to let the student drive the teaching; you need to meet them where they are. You can't hold on to your agenda; you'll be disappointed. Go with where the students are, start there. Help them there." When a holistic educator purposefully pauses, the classroom focus shifts from the dissemination of information to a learner-centered pedagogy which prioritizes a

connection to the student and their experience. James, an executive coach and author, explained, “Let [your plan] go and trust people in the deepest and most meaningful way possible.” In a discussion, Kevin noticed how James had a clarity in his ideas but was remarkably able to listen to the many different perspectives on a topic, willing to let go of his agenda and trust in the greater knowledge of the group. Being heard and seeing his willingness to respond and trust the others helped Kevin to feel supported and created a sense of unity among the group members. James went on to say, “To be deeply present with them whether it is one student or 30 or 150 in a room, it is about allowing them to be fully seen and heard. Whatever my agenda is, being willing to pause it and allow the student to voice what is on their mind, then reflecting back to them what I heard and how this teaching applies to what they said.” Supporting what happens during the purposeful pause is applying a conceptual and experiential approach to learning.

### *Experiential learning*

Holistic educators must be able not only to provide the conceptual information, but also the experiential practices which more fully draw out and engage the whole student’s mind, body, and spirit in the classroom along with the content. John, an executive director for a training nonprofit and pastor who has been teaching for over 20 years says, “Staying curious, asking questions, being okay to explore a little bit and sit with something a little bit longer than my natural inclination.” Kevin was in a year-long online leadership class with John. Despite not being in person, John’s thoughtfulness, pacing of the class, curiosity in personally learning about his students, and genuine interest in personal growth as well as the related experiential activities in the course conveyed immediacy. The result of this for Kevin was a sense of spaciousness that invited exploration of

applying course concepts to self as a leader. Connectedness between teacher and student reduces relational distance and improves psychological closeness, increasing immediacy, and deepening learning. This is one way a holistic educator draws forth the whole student in the learning environment and increases connectedness.

This experiential pedagogical approach creates opportunities for students to learn by doing in applied, practical, and engaging ways. As a result, this can create space for the whole student to be present in the classroom learning experience, including feelings which are often separated from the learning environment. J.P. Miller (2006) says:

Timeless learning also is integrative in that it tends to link the different parts of ourselves. Too often we compartmentalize learning into different aspects such as the intellect and the physical and they are left separate. In timeless learning they are seen as connected. (p. 6)

John discussed how the impact of applying an experiential approach to learning drew out some deep questions from students. He said, “The pedagogy of experiential learning led to a moment of the necessity of being present and attuned to the deeper inner workings and the spiritual dimension of education that is often not acknowledged.” Experiential learning creates an environment to access feelings which can evoke a teacher’s soulfulness in the learning environment. John went on to say that students, “might remember one thing that you say in a 20-minute lecture and they will remember a lot more of what they do and how they experience this and...wrestle with it and apply it in their own lives.” John believes students remember so much more from their experience rather than the details of a lecture. He gives an example of experiential learning as follows, “I love getting my hands involved and engaged. So how do I get

people to take the information and to turn it into something more practical that can create an impact?" Applied, hands-on, practical information helps students to learn in a deeper, experiential way, to engage more meaningfully with the information so that they can apply it in their lives. As holistic educators create these opportunities, they can draw out the whole student's presence, thus allowing the holistic educator to impact the student more dynamically.

### ***Equal Partners in Learning***

Another experiential interpersonal practice for communicating for communion is to see students as equals in the learning process, empowering them to come up with their own answers. To do this, these holistic educators were willing to let go of their own egos' need to provide all the answers and instead teach from a place of soulfulness. These holistic educators decentralized leadership for a more equitable division of power in generating knowledge in the classroom in which students could generate knowledge. Teachers and students were willing to engage in "co-creating" the learning environment together in a participatory community of learning rather than the teacher being largely in charge of the learning direction. James described how his own teachers didn't ever make it seem like they had all the answers but instead treated him like an equal. They didn't give him the answers, but instead helped him to find those answers within himself. The result of teachers allowing students more space to generate their own answers and co-create the classroom environment is that students are more engaged in the learning experience, and students and teachers learn and grow together.

### ***Full attention***

Another facet of this interpersonal communication approach is for the holistic educator to offer full

attention through mindfully listening, witnessing nonverbal behavior, recognizing emotions, and sensing. Through the teacher being present and using a student-centered experiential pedagogy, the whole student is drawn forth. John described one such moment, "We said, hey, there are some people asking some really deep things to explore further, so just being able to be present, sit with it, and listen to what was going on was impactful." This holistic educator allowed space in the classroom for what was happening in students' lives beyond the course material to be present rather than separated out and ignored. Larry said, "You've brought your subject matter and they've brought a problem with a parent, a divorced family, a parent that is sick, a grandparent that has just passed away, an automobile accident, a problematic relationship, an abusive situation, a gender confusion." He went on, "The single biggest thing a teacher has to do is to feel their presence as you share your presence. Be there for them, with them. I think that's what makes a great teacher." When a student vulnerably shows themselves in this way and feels that holistic educators offer their full presence, attention, and nonverbal behaviors to them through listening, witnessing nonverbals, and sensing their emotions, the student feels fully seen and safe in the presence of that teacher. Students feel seen, heard, and cared for by holistic educators who make relational space available by listening, honoring the emotional dimension of their being, and sincerely caring for the student to help them overcome their obstacles.

### ***Empathic Listening***

Empathic listening is an interpersonal nonverbal behavior which creates safe spaces for students' self-exploration, participation in the process, and to feel understood and heard. Floyd (2014) says, "When we listen to others, we offer not only our time but also our psychological presence, our cognitive attention, and our emotional

responsiveness” (p. 2). John explained, “Acknowledging the emotional element of learning, it’s not just cerebral, it’s emotional. There’s various factors that are at play all the time and I think that goes into inclusivity.” Giving the example of a training session, he said:

You could just sense the mood shift in the room. They had gone from a little bit more joyful and joking lighthearted mood to a little bit more serious and somber...So we took the time to explore that with them further and we said we are just kind of sensing this...So it opened up into this great conversation that then led into extra layers of work with them.

Empathic listening as a communication behavior for being present to students helps bring the heart into education.

### ***Sensing Emotion***

Another way holistic educators offer their full attention is by paying attention to students’ nonverbal communication behaviors to sense the deeper emotional experience a student is having. *Sensing* means feeling the energy of a student and using what was sensed to help guide the direction of the class. Shanti explained how the foundation of sensing is feeling, “I think the real practice in all honesty is feeling, feeling everything.” She goes on to describe that she can sense a variety of things about a student that can help her to meet the student more fully in the present moment, including patterns of behavior, facial expressions, body language, mood, energy, and emotions.

Holistic educators not only make space for the deeper dimensions of a student’s being, but they also help students to overcome the obstacles they are confronting in their lives. While this could occur in various kinds of classes, when teaching

students yoga, the teacher must watch their student’s range of movement on a continuum over time according to Shanti. Based on what she observed, if a student is failing to develop in their practice, then it’s important to identify if the issue is physical or mental. Sometimes it’s just a habitual pattern that needs to be interrupted to overcome the behavior. To do so, a teacher needs to identify at a deeper level why students are limited and what their internal obstacles are. The holistic educator must identify students’ obstacles using communication behaviors such as listening and watching their students’ behavior, sensing what the obstacle is within the student, and addressing them in a way that is sensitive to the obstacle. Further, Larry suggests that once a holistic educator is aware of the struggle within the student, they may empathize and reflect on their own past experiences, including mistakes, and be willing to be vulnerable and share their story with the student, including how they overcame their similar obstacles. In these ways, holistic educators draw forth students’ life challenges and empower them to overcome obstacles.

If a holistic educator senses the mood of a student or group has changed, they can respond to it, addressing the shift in mood with students. For instance, if a student is unwilling to engage in the process, Anna suggested that a teacher still see the goodness within a challenging student. Larry recommends inviting a student to an office hour outside of class to connect. James addresses any disruptive or unengaged behavior in class by calling it out to create tension and draw in all the students. Thus, when James faces a disruptive student in class, he calls that student out in a way that both addresses the disruptive behavior, invites the attention of the group, and opens up a space for conversation. For a disruptive student, this is a way they can feel seen in their wholeness. In these ways, holistic educators embody presence by connecting with the emotional dimension of their

being, understanding the deeper experience students are having based on what they can sense, and using that to meet students where they are in the moment (Ucok-Sayrack, 2014).

### **Channeling**

Channeling is a fascinating metaphysical communication behavior which emerged unexpectedly from the interviews. Petit (2007) defines channeling as, “Communication between an individual and a non-physical source” (p. 1). The participants’ preparation for presence through contemplative practices deepened their connection to soul which provided access to the state of consciousness necessary for channeling, including during class. The holistic educators spoke of such messages arriving from various sources such as the students’ souls, deceased people, spiritual teachers, beings, the divine, and the wisdom of the channeler’s own soul. Participants used terms such as, “whole-body-yes,” “lightbulb,” “ah-ha moments of insight,” or “prompts from within” to indicate communication understood as channeling. Channeling messages may demonstrate presence with students in ways which can be deeply impactful to student learning by inviting awareness of soulfulness in the classroom. Shanti was leading a group of first responders dealing with PTSD and received the internal “prompt” to sing the *ho’oponopono* song, a Hawaiian healing song with the lyrics, “*I’m sorry. Please forgive me. Thank you. I love you*” (Bodin et al., 2016). Although she was a little apprehensive about following the prompt, she sang the song and created a moment of community where the students wept and found deep meaning.

### **Discussion**

Kevin says,

When I set out to pursue this research project, the impetus for the study was the impactful teachers, mentors, and guides in

my life whose role-modeling impacted me so deeply. They inspired me to want to pursue this path of becoming a holistic educator myself. Working towards this goal, I always wanted to know how they did it, how I could become like them. When I stumbled across the field of holistic education, its emphasis on engaging the whole self—mind, body, and spirit—spoke very deeply as a start to a solution. That education is much more than the content being covered. And when I read the quote from [J.P.] Miller’s (2006) text describing presence as the most impactful thing, something clicked in me. I had a sort of an aha moment that a teacher’s presence is the key to becoming an impactful mentor myself. However, in reading many of the works across a variety of fields from holistic education, spirituality in education, contemplative studies, and communication, many of the fields had pieces and parts that mentioned presence, but nothing provided a solid framework to understand what presence is or how to exhibit presence with a student in a concrete way. The focus on communication was missing.

This work is an attempt to answer the question, how do holistic educators embody presence through their communication practices with students? Building on the research from many diverse, yet related, fields of study with consideration of teacher immediacy and student learning, the intentional use of silence, and mindful and empathic listening, these holistic educators showed what can be done when they are implemented with students. The findings provide a fuller and more detailed picture of the communication processes involved in attending to the relational in-between space identified by communication scholars, and the resulting benefits from the experience of presence by educators and

students alike. The focus on communication in this study provided the opportunity to define presence as a multidimensional concept of soulfulness, being present, and communion as well as identifying a cluster of communication practices involved in communicating for communion and community.

Someone interested in becoming a holistic educator can begin to implement both personal practices and communication practices with students. While there are a variety of ways a teacher can bring presence from a personal level of soulfulness to soulfully being present with their students, one contemplative practice to do with students in a classroom is being willing to purposefully pause the planned lesson in response to witnessing the wholeness of their students. Purposefully pausing is a contemplative practice that requires mindfully being in the present moment with the wholeness of the students' experiences so one may witness something occurring within a student. This means being willing to let go of expectations of how the learning experience should go and instead to meet students where they are in the learning journey. Teaching becomes an interpersonal communication process where the teacher is aware and connected with the wholeness of the student.

Different communication practices are the key to witnessing the various layers and dimensions of the whole student. These communication practices include but are not limited to verbal communication, nonverbal communication such as body language and facial expressions, emotions, energy and sensing. With the teacher valuing this pedagogical approach, having access to their soulfulness and being present to the wholeness of the student through these various communication practices, the holistic educator then has the option to respond in a variety of ways in which

communication can deepen the connection from the level of being present to communion.

By witnessing the student in their wholeness, the holistic educator turns teaching into a conversation by responding. Common ways mentioned by the participants included showing care and compassion, understanding, making the student feel seen, channeling wisdom, and helping students to transcend obstacles. Responding in these ways transformed the interaction from simply being present and turned teaching into a much deeper, impactful, and transformational relationship of communion where the soul of the student and teacher meet. This is the experience that is akin to darshan which is transformative for the teacher as well as the student. This restores the heart to education. These findings provide a foundation to understand presence both as a multidimensional concept of soulfulness, being present and communion as well as offers practical applications for applying them communicatively in learning environments.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

Limitations of this study include the small number of participants, all known to the lead researcher. Future study with a larger sample, and possibly using quantitative methods, could draw from the concepts and findings to develop research questions and hypotheses to further explore the phenomena revealed here. Future research could further develop the conceptual framework of soulfulness, being present, and communicating for communion including applying these experientially in holistic pedagogy. Further study of the practices of transformative holistic educators and their impact on students from students' perspective is warranted. Studying the experiences of other students of holistic educators, particularly those who have experienced the transformative power of darshan, would add to the insights derived. These

holistic educators all mention the transformative influence of their own teachers, which is another area of potential study. A more in-depth exploration of the contemplative practices of holistic educators to prepare themselves for being present to their students in the classroom is another significant area to explore further.

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