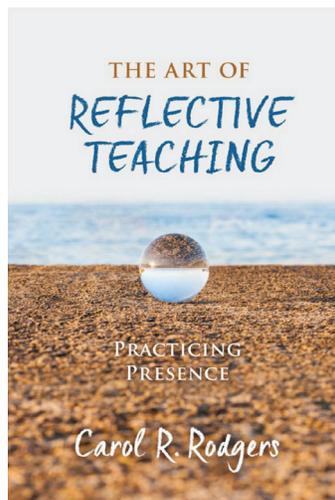

Democracy & Education

A Book Review of *The Art of Reflective Teaching: Practicing Presence*

Jeff Frank (St. Lawrence University)

READING CAROL RODGERS'S book *The Art of Reflective Teaching: Practicing Presence* is like being invited into a space where teaching becomes more expansive and where the reader once again believes that teachers can do profoundly important and transformative work. As she mentions in the first sentence of the book, students are often asked to write a philosophy of education statement as a condition for becoming a teacher. Rodgers's book is a philosophy-of-education statement but one that is a *lived* philosophy, a philosophy educated by a lifetime of teaching and reflecting on teaching. It is a deeply moving book, one that deserves the widest possible audience.

Given this journal's focus on democracy and education, my review focuses on the ways *The Art of Reflective Teaching: Practicing Presence* can help a reader think about the democratic potential of practicing presence in the classroom. Although this focus will not allow me to address, or even suggest, the full scope of Rodgers's book, the focus is not arbitrary, and it should give a reader some sense for Rodgers's overall project and its significance. Rodgers draws on John Dewey throughout the book, and like Dewey, Rodgers (2020) sees democracy as a way of life (p. 59). As she notes in her preface, her teaching practice is guided by three main questions, the second of which is: "How must I work the soil of democracy in education so it will grow and sustain itself in the world?" (p. xiv) Though the word "democracy" only appears sporadically in the text, I see her democratic aspirations animating her approach to teaching. Because Rodgers touches on so many



interesting aspects of teaching, it may be easy for a reader to lose sight of the fact that at the heart of Rodgers's project is a call to work the soil of democracy. One might get the impression when reading, for example, a section on mindfulness or the aesthetic/poetic dimensions of teaching that Rodgers is suggesting that teachers should withdraw from the world and into a private space of contemplation. Nothing is further from the truth. A teacher pauses in reflection in order to serve the cause

of democracy more deeply. And a teacher serves the cause of democracy, according to Rodgers, when they bring their whole self to see the whole self of the student, when they practice—in Rodgers's words—presence. As Rodgers notes, "Presence from the teacher's point of view is the experience of bringing one's whole self to full attention so as to perceive what is happening in the moment" (p. 1). We can never do this fully, just as we cannot do it all the time, but it is an aspiration worthy of our calling as educators. Democracy exists only insofar as we make this attempt, again and again, learning—experimentally, experientially—from our mistakes and growing, through reflection and a desire to live more fully so that others might also experience growth. Many of us were called to

JEFF FRANK is an associate professor at St. Lawrence University in Canton, New York. Recent publications include two books, *Teaching in the Now: John Dewey on the Education Present* (Purdue, 2019), and *Being a Presence for Students: Teaching as a Lived Defense of Liberal Education* (Lever, 2019).

teaching because we believe that “even in the highly regulated halls of school, there is a light that manages to shine through the cracks” (p. xiii). We know that democracy is imperiled (p. xv), and we know how constrained and underappreciated the work of teaching is. Despite this, the light shines through. Rodgers’s book magnifies this light while offering a framework that will help teachers live more fully into the light and its possibilities, developing a presence that sustains the possibilities of democracy.

Taking a step back, the book is organized into five main parts. The first part introduces presence, while the second part defines presence, largely through an engagement with the work of Dewey. Part three is a discussion of presence within the dynamics of the classroom, part four offers a discussion of reflection for practice (again, largely drawing on the work of Dewey), and the final part is a detailed discussion of Rodgers’s practice of teaching an online course for future teachers. Each part is integral to the whole, but for the sake of this review, I focus on part three because I find it so impressive and also because I think it exemplifies how philosophically informed work in education can actually influence practice and practitioners. Any philosopher of education who laments their lack of influence on practice would do well to engage with Rodgers’s project, especially as it is discussed in part three. Even if a reader finds aspects of her project to disagree with, it is hard not to agree that Rodgers’s prose invites teachers to engage.

Part three begins with an important distinction, one drawn from Larry Cuban’s work, between tasks that are complicated versus tasks that are complex. Brain surgery and rocket science are offered as complicated tasks. “Confidence in performance along with predictable and carefully monitored results” (Rodgers, 2020, p. 45) are hallmarks of complicated tasks. By contrast, teaching is complex, and classrooms are complex systems, “composed of curricula, teaching and students, their actions, interactions, and invisible cognitive and emotional inner actions. In addition, there are contextual forces at play [like structural injustices, histories of oppression, the assets communities bring, and much more]” (Rodgers, 2020, p. 45). While complicated work is highly valued (and compensated) in the United States, complex work like teaching is often misunderstood and undervalued. As well, efforts to force teaching into the mold of complicated work—either in an attempt raise its status or to make it more manageable for novices—ultimately fails to respect the type of work teaching is and the good it can do. But even if we agree with Rodgers that teaching is complex work, we still wonder: “How can one be present to all that?” (Rodgers, 2020, p. 46) How can a teacher learn to be fully alive to everything going on in the classroom along with all the factors outside of school that influence the life of a classroom? Rodgers responds to this question by turning to the work of David Hawkins, diagramming the complexities of the “teaching triangle” (Rodgers, 2020, p. 47) in order to give readers a better sense of the challenges and possibilities teaching so that they might exercise agency in establishing a vision of teaching that can be enacted and grown into as one continues to live one’s vision and reflect on the impacts (very broadly understood) of that vision.

Readers may be familiar with Hawkins’s teaching triangle (you may recall a picture with an “I” on the top node, with a “Thou”

and an “It” on the bottom nodes), but—if not—the triangle is the relationships that exist between the I (the teacher), the Thou (the learner) and the It (the subject matter). Though I generally find myself skimming over diagrams in favor of an author’s textual explanations, Rodgers (2020) diagrams the multiple relationships that exist in the teaching triangle in ways that I ultimately found extremely helpful. In particular, I appreciate how she reminds us that each “I” in the classroom—be it the teacher or the learner—is composed of multiple selves, and on any given day, conflicts or opportunities will emerge depending upon how these selves relate to each other. This is where democracy once again comes to the foreground. Making the attempt to live our belief in democracy entails focusing on the quality of relationships that we are in. As Rodgers notes, much of the work in the teaching triangle is building relationships and the capacity to repair those relationships when things go awry (for any number of reasons). Importantly, democracy doesn’t only happen on the I-Thou axis. “It [democracy] is, in fact, the shared undertaking and experiences that bind [the class]. In other words, the I-Thou and Thou-Thou relationships grow out of shared encounters with the It” (p. 60).

I want to emphasize this point, not least of all because it very helpfully illustrates why a Dewey-inspired approach to teaching isn’t “student centered,” even though it treats the learner with the deepest possible respect. Everything in teaching is interconnected and in relationship, and the line that connects students to meaningful and engaging content is central. In fact, Rodgers (2020) proclaims that the teacher’s ability to create an environment and opportunities that successfully connect learners to meaningful content is the definition of presence (p. 67). It took me a while to appreciate this point, and I am still processing it. One immediate response I had led me to wonder what we can do to make sure that our classrooms are spaces where students understand the differences between critical thinking and believing in unfounded conspiracies. Education that isn’t grounded in enriching content, education that relies predominately on I-Thou relationships without a strong connect to an It, may make it more likely that students develop antidemocratic relationships to ideas later in life. Without a strong grounding in challenging content, one may come to look for a charismatic leader and not seek to do the difficult work of engaging with the issues and idea. As Rodgers helpfully notes, being present to students and their relationship to content is very different from being a teacher “with a presence.” “Having a presence means teachers are drawn to the person teaching. This is not the kind of presence I mean” (p. 8). Teacher educators and teachers committed to democracy would do well to think even more about how to facilitate relationships between students and the types of content that allow those students to develop democratic habits that will serve as something like an inoculation against the types of harmful antidemocratic beliefs we see flourishing in our time. One way teachers can do this is by treating their subject matter less like an It—inert material that must be covered by the end of the year—and more like a Thou who invites continued engagement and calls forth our deepest care.

There is far more that I could write about this incredibly rich book. I close with gratitude for the ways Rodgers helps us live the

questions that are central to teaching. Being present to students is something we are always in the process of learning how to do, and teacher education worthy of the name will fortify us for the difficulties of this work. *The Art of Reflective Teaching: Practicing Presence* is an essential resource for anyone on the journey to become more fully alive, awake, and present to teaching and its

deep and continuing importance to building the future of democracy.

Reference

Rodgers, C. R. (2020). *The art of reflective teaching: Practicing presence*. Teachers College Press.