

# 2

## Teacher presence

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#### This chapter will

- introduce you to some strategies to help you have a 'presence' in the classroom;
- discuss what it means to have presence, both techniques and developing your own confidence in the classroom;
- support you in reflecting upon which characteristics create presence and how you can develop your skills.

## Introduction: is presence the 'x factor' of teaching?

Think about someone you know that you would identify as having presence. What is it about them? The clothes they wear or the way they use their body language? Is it the way they speak or how they interact with other people? It is quite difficult to say exactly what it is that gives some people that special something, that 'x factor', which makes them stand out from the crowd or encourages other people to stop and listen to them.

To have presence can be very useful (and sometimes essential), not only in the classroom but also in meetings and situations where you want to have an influence. In fact, this phenomenon is written about in a range of fields: leadership and management (Senge *et al.*, 2004), business (Carny *et al.*, 2010) and also within the context of behaviour management (Jones, 2007). It appears to be something important in our interactions, but is quite difficult to completely define. In Chapter 9 (written by Emma Clarke and Steve McNichol), you will also read of Canter's assertive discipline approach which has an emphasis upon the direction (assertion) of the teacher towards the pupils, which can be interpreted as having a presence in the classroom. Within this chapter, I will argue that effective presence is more subtle than Canter describes, but the importance of the teacher role (which Canter, 1992, identifies) remains a theme.

In education, teacher presence is not often written about explicitly (and is certainly not framed as an approach to communication, as I shall present in this chapter), but it is talked about often. In fact, the lack of presence can be a significant barrier to trainee teachers (and qualified teachers) in having that positive influence in the classroom which inspires children to engage in the learning. In this chapter, we shall look more closely at 'what is teacher presence?' and introduce you to some techniques that can help you develop this aspect of your teacher role. For mentors, this chapter should challenge you to think about the feedback you give to trainees and ensure that vague terms, such as presence, are unpicked to support professional development.



## Reflection and discussion activity

### Reflection

Before reading the next part of the chapter:

Trainee, list the qualities or characteristics that you think create presence in the classroom. You perhaps know someone who has presence so try to describe them and what it is that makes you identify them as someone with presence.

Mentor, think about when you might have used the term 'presence' in your mentoring role and unpick some of the features you are expecting to see from the trainee. Be as specific as possible.

### Discussion

Trainee and mentor, now compare your lists. Start to discuss similarities and differences in the lists. Is presence something some people have, or can we learn some of these strategies?

## What is presence and can it be learned?

In the first trainee and mentor reflection activity, you may have thought of someone that you would identify as having presence. It is likely that some of the characteristics are related to non-verbal communication: use of gesture, smile, position in the classroom and an enthusiastic approach, for example. You may also have listed some ways in which they use their voice: intonation, change in volume. People who are identified as having a presence often also present as confident, whether that is genuine confidence or presenting in that way (see Figure 2.2 and Amy Cuddy's work later in this chapter). These are all ideas that we shall explore together in detail throughout this chapter. As we start to unpick the concept of teacher presence, hopefully you are beginning to realise that we can learn some techniques to help us in the classroom (and other professional situations requiring influence and effective communication). It is true to say that some people do seem to have that instinctive way of asserting their presence and having an influence in the classroom. Some of this is related to confidence (genuine or presented) or a willingness to overcome any inhibitions when engaging the pupils in their learning. While identifying techniques is reasonably easy, developing your persona so that you present

as confident and use an engaging style with the pupils takes more self-reflection and rehearsal. It is far more complex to truly believe in your own competence as a teacher and then present that confidence in the classroom. That is why it is so important to develop as a reflective practitioner, and the mentor role is significant in coaching trainees to become more reflective, willing to attempt new things (and sometimes fail) and develop a confidence in their own professional practice.

When considering this phenomenon – and whether techniques can be learnt or developed to increase presence – it is helpful to make a few initial assertions. First, presence is viewed by this author as a communication tool and is related to engaging others and having influence. As we look at some research and case studies throughout the chapter, you will see how this perspective is supported by others (such as Babad *et al.*, 2004; Rodgers and Raider-Roth, 2006; Korthagen and Vasalos, 2009). This perspective is important as communication is a key aspect in a positive classroom environment to enable all pupils to participate in learning. Second, within literature there is a very interesting distinction between *having presence* and *being present*. *Having presence* relates to the techniques the teacher uses and reflects a somewhat behaviourist approach to communication (see Chapter 9). Behaviourism, in its broadest sense, suggests that a certain stimulus can encourage a particular response. The use of stickers, or awards, to reinforce positive behaviour is an example. In this context of communicating through teacher presence, it could be that a positive and enthusiastic persona presented by the teacher may encourage pupils to engage and participate. Alternatively, *being present* (a concept promoted by Rodgers and Raider-Roth, 2006), has a different emphasis. While the outward communication by the teacher remains important, these authors identify that a genuine and authentic relationship with the pupils, built upon mutual respect and trust, is more important than acting or learning techniques. It is this genuine *being present* (p.271) and *in the moment* (p.279) when nothing else matters but the learning, the students and the subject matter that culminates in true teacher presence.

These two ways of viewing presence will help to shape the discussion in this chapter.



## Case study

David is a trainee primary teacher following a School Direct route into teaching. He is in his first term with a school he knows quite well from volunteering with them prior to starting the course. David says that he is happy at the school and has a good relationship with his mentor, Tim. David has been leading groups consistently and well during the first part of his placement. He has also led a sequence of English lessons with Tim in the classroom and working with small groups. David has felt confident leading the English lessons because English is a specialism for him and he has observed Tim leading English previously.

This week David taught a science lesson and Tim observed him. After the lesson, Tim asked David to reflect specifically upon the progress children made and their engagement in the lesson. David realised that many of the children had not been focused on the lesson, and instead were off task during practical activities. David was able to explain how he used the behaviour systems in place and he felt that the children needed to be more committed to the lesson and listen to the instructions. The following day, Tim provided David with some formal written feedback. In the areas for development Tim suggested: 'Have more presence'.



## Reflection and discussion activity

Mentor, although we may feel that we have discussed a situation with our trainee and that they understand the targets set, sometimes we make assumptions. Reflect on what assumptions may have been made by Tim. What do you think Tim actually meant by 'have more presence'? When providing follow up written support to trainees, think about how you communicate those more complex concepts, such as presence or persona.

Trainee, presently in this case study we only really know what David thought and the written feedback that Tim provided. We will return to the case study later to explore what Tim said in the verbal feedback. Take time to think about the target: *Have more presence*. What do you think this might mean? What do you think may have influenced the perceived lack of presence in this lesson?

Trainee and mentor, begin to draft a more specific target that would help David progress. Perhaps your target will be linked to being confident in the science subject matter so that David can be fully 'in the moment' of learning. Or perhaps you will concentrate on his non-verbal behaviours or use of voice.

## Having presence: developing techniques

You may have heard of the 'Dr Fox Effect'. This term refers to a study in the 1970s by Naftulin, Ware and Donnelly (1973) in which student evaluation ratings were given to 'Dr Myron L. Fox' for his lecture entitled 'mathematical games theory as applied to physician education'. During the lecture Dr Fox used techniques to engage the audience which included humour and giving an enthusiastic presentation. However, what the learners failed to notice (and the learners were a group of experienced educators themselves, such as social worker educators) was that Dr Fox was giving something of a nonsense lecture, with contradictions throughout, neologisms and conclusions which did not support the previous statement. You may have realised: Dr Fox was an actor. His rapport and enthusiasm had, according to Naftulin *et al.*, 'seduced' the group.



## Find out more from . . . internet clips

The Dr Fox lecture is available on YouTube: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=RcxW6nrWwtc](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RcxW6nrWwtc)

Accessed January 27, 2017

While there have been some more recent studies that have criticised this idea of 'seduction' (this term is used by Naftulin *et al.* (1973) to mean that learners are seduced into thinking they have learned something by a charismatic teacher), the way you present yourself as the teacher is important. You need to show enthusiasm and interest in the subject yourself before you can expect your learners to engage. I am sure you can think of examples from sessions you have attended when the delivery of the content has been so 'dry' and 'boring' that it is very hard to concentrate however committed you are as the learner. This may seem like an obvious statement, but for trainee teachers sometimes there is so much to think about: the subject content, the pedagogical

approaches you are using, ensuring positive learning behaviours and perhaps your mentor is observing. It is easy to become overwhelmed with so many priorities and consequently not communicate the love of learning and enjoyment of the subject as you would wish. Peel and Babad (2014) replicated Naftulin *et al.*'s study, and while they found that learners were not as naïve as originally presented by the original research team in thinking they learned significantly new things just because the teacher was charismatic, this recent study does support that learners value the enthusiasm and energy shown in the delivery by the teacher. Neill and Caswell (1993) call it 'nonverbal pzazz'; White and Gardner (2012) call it the 'classroom x-factor') but a key message for you is to be enthusiastic: enjoy (and show that you enjoy) leading the learning in your class.

Building upon this point that having enthusiasm and building rapport with your learners is a positive starting point, we shall start to unpick the different ways we communicate and establish a presence, including some exercises for you to try. Another familiar (mis)quoted researcher leads us to think about non-verbal communication. Mehrabrian (1972) is well known for his work in the area of non-verbal communication and it is from his 1972 work that the '7-38-55' distinction has emerged relating to when communicating attitudes or feelings: according to Mehrabrian, 7 per cent of communication of attitudes and feelings are in the words we say, 38 per cent in the way we say them and 55 per cent in facial expression. Research in this area has moved forward from this simplistic formula, and there are authors who argue fervently that words are just as important as the way we say them and the non-verbal behaviours we exhibit. However, the delivery of your words and your use of non-verbal behaviours can have a significant impact upon the presence we have in the classroom. In fact, the message you are communicating is at its strongest when your actual words, the way you say them (intonation) and your non-verbal communication are all in synchronisation.

## Which non-verbal behaviours help create presence in the classroom?

There have been some interesting research studies looking at teachers' non-verbal behaviours and students' perceptions of those teachers. Some examples of this research can be found in Ambady and Rosenthal (1993), Babad *et al.* (2003) and Babad *et al.* (2004). These researchers were particularly interested in how participants who did not know the teacher rated them when only watching short clips of non-verbal behaviours with no sound content (they call these 'thin slices'). These initial ratings were compared to the overall evaluations of the actual class at the end of the teaching semester. Those initial 'thin slices' predicted the end ratings that actual classes of students gave to the teacher. It appears that we communicate a great deal through our body language and non-verbal behaviours and those initial impressions seem to remain when teaching over a longer period of time. It is important to acknowledge that these researchers did focus mainly upon high school and college students in USA and Israel but Babad, with other researchers (Babad *et al.* 1991; Babad and Taylor, 1992), also extended their work to looking at those in fourth grade, which would equate to Year 5 in the UK.

This body of research identifies three important aspects of communication in the classroom:

- a) self-presentation;
- b) social perception;
- c) social interaction.

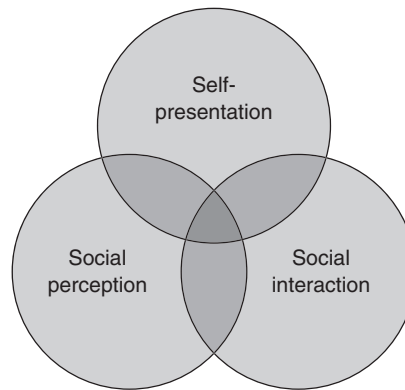


Figure 2.1 Presence as an integrated social experience

Adapted from Babad *et al.* (2004)

This provides a helpful way to view teacher presence which includes the things that you do and the way you present as a teacher (self-presentation), the way that your pupils' perceive you (social perception) and the relationships you have with your pupils (social interaction).

Later in the chapter, when we look at what it means to 'be present' and the importance of the relationships within the classroom, social perception and social interaction will be addressed. So, let's think about you as the teacher and how you can use techniques to help present yourself in a confident and influential way.

## Self-presentation

One of the most important things to reflect upon is how you demonstrate a confident and calm manner in the classroom. Carney *et al.* (2010) explore how our body language can not only give the impression of confidence to the audience, but their research also suggests that when we adopt a strong and confident stance it actually impacts the genuine confidence we have in ourselves.



### Find out more from . . . TED Talks

In her 2012 TED Talk, Amy Cuddy addresses how our body language can help us in presenting as confident in high-stress situations, such as a job interview. Her research (with Carney *et al.*, 2010) asked participants to practise 'high-power' poses. Have a look at Amy's talk here:

[www.ted.com/talks/amy\\_cuddy\\_your\\_body\\_language\\_shapes\\_who\\_you\\_are?language=en](http://www.ted.com/talks/amy_cuddy_your_body_language_shapes_who_you_are?language=en)

Accessed March 23, 2017

Try some of these high-power poses when preparing yourself for your day of teaching.

Also, notice your own body language and when you may exhibit body language that does not exude confidence. Cuddy (2012), as you will see in the talk, uses the phrase *fake it 'til you make it*. Consider how your non-verbal behaviours, as well as your verbal behaviours, exhibit the teacher you want to be.

## Which body language should we use to show confidence and presence in the classroom?

Along with Amy Cuddy, other researchers in this field (Elisha Babad, for example) agree that there are some key ways we can use our body language. A key tip is to think carefully about open and closed body language. When we fold our arms or cross our legs, this can be interpreted as closed body language and those who observe us may feel we are not approachable, or that we are very nervous. Alternatively, display open, positive body language such as some of the suggestions below:

**Posture:** Ensure that your posture is good by straightening your back and keeping your shoulders extended rather than hunched.



Figure 2.2 *Straight back, shoulders extended*

**Use of gesture:** Open palms are a positive way to communicate willingness to listen to others, openness to ideas and warmth towards your pupils.



*Figure 2.3 Open palms*

**Assertive gesture:** The use of 'palms down' is an assertive gesture. It can help you communicate your point strongly or show that the discussion has ended.



*Figure 2.4 Palms down*



**Facial expression:** Ensure that you have a positive expression. A smile is extremely powerful in building rapport and creating a positive climate for learning. However, recipients can tell the difference between real and fake smiles. Real smiles are also seen in the eyes as well as the mouth. Use eye contact well to show interest in what the learners are saying or doing (or to show that you have seen what the learners are doing.).



Figure 2.5 Smile!

Babad *et al.* (2004) also identified some other characteristics of good teacher behaviours when they are teaching:

- A relaxed persona with positive body language
- Stands rather than sits when addressing the whole group
- Expressive in hand, body, face and voice
- Moves around the space (but not excessively)
- Has a strong orientation towards the learners. This means that you are not just talking to an audience but that you are really engaging and noticing your learners, and allowing yourself to explore ideas deeper with your learners (rather than distracted by the next point on the lesson plan).

**Grounded:** When you are in the classroom use a ‘grounded’ stance (Churches and Terry, 2007) to show that you are confident and comfortable in front of an audience. This involves ensuring that you are standing with your legs side by side with your weight equally distributed (not leaning to one side), good posture (shoulders



Figure 2.6 Grounded stance

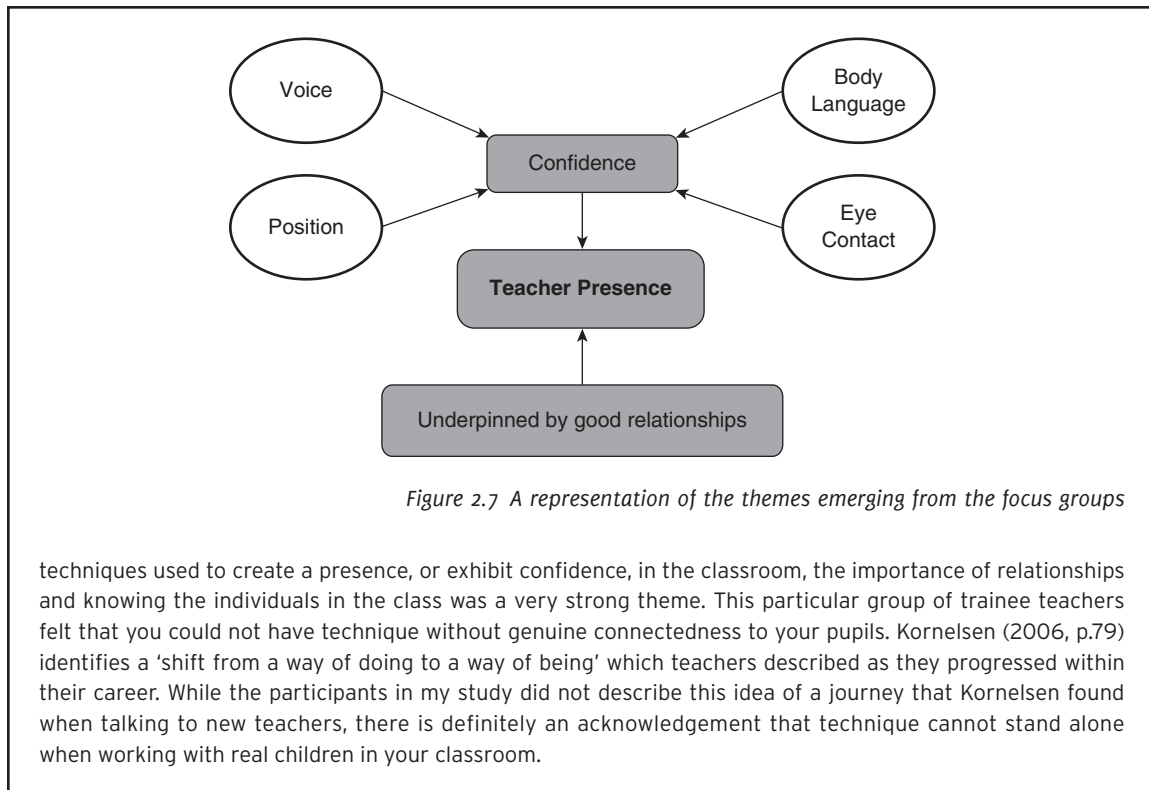
extended not hunched) and arms by your side (not hidden in pockets, folded or behind your back). Ensure that you are looking at the class and showing that you are acknowledging your learners.



### Find out more from . . . research

In my own research, I conducted a study with some trainee teachers at the end of their programme. In two separate focus groups the trainee teachers were asked to watch four clips of teachers teaching for 30 seconds. Unlike the studies by Ambady and Rosenthal (1993) and Babad *et al.* (2003), the participants were able to listen to the words being spoken as well as the non-verbal actions. They were then asked to discuss 'Which characteristics create presence?' Using thematic analysis (drawing out key themes from what was said) of the participants' responses, a key message that emerged from both focus groups was that confidence, or at least to appear confident, is important. From reading this chapter so far you will see that this links very closely to the work of Carney *et al.* (2010). That confidence, according to these trainee teachers, is evident in the positive body language exhibited by the teacher, the eye contact (including 'the teacher look'), and the intonation and careful use of voice to communicate and maintain interest. Also, the position of the teacher in the classroom and the way the space in the classroom is used was important.

The four categories identified in this small-scale research are helpful in starting to unpick some of the techniques that can be used in the classroom. However, while these participants were able to verbalise those



## Case study

Let's return to the conversation between David (the trainee in the case study) and Tim (the mentor).

David had received written feedback from Tim which said: 'Have more presence'. David asked Tim to explain more of what he meant and here is an excerpt from their conversation.

Tim: When we discussed the lesson, you acknowledged that the children were not on task and they were not really taking notice of you when you gave them instructions. Your voice was very quiet and you were addressing them from the corner table, where you were working with your group. I could tell that you were getting worried about the lack of focus during the lesson because you stopped looking around the room, you just focused on your group and some of the others were not achieving very much.

David: I did realise that some of the children were not on task but I had told everyone what to do before I went to my group. The children should have got on with the task.



## Reflection and discussion activity

Trainee and mentor, look at the targets you drafted earlier. Which one would you suggest now? What advice would you give to David to support his own self-reflection and support him in accepting constructive feedback?

In the case study, David is obviously exhibiting some behaviours that are demonstrating his lack of confidence in that particular session. He has not moved himself from the place where he is sitting to address the entire class (positionality), or used eye contact and positive body language to reassert himself in the classroom. In fact, from Tim's observation, it appears that David was either avoiding looking at the children (due to the fact that he was not confident in tackling any lack of engagement) or he was so engrossed in working with his group that he had lost that global view of the classroom that is so important. Tim also mentioned the use of voice. Using intonation and volume well is important. I recommend a site called Voice Care to my trainee teachers, which has lots of activities to develop your use of voice and also gives tips about how to look after your voice.



## Find out more from . . . websites

The Voice Care website has activities and tips for developing your voice: <http://voicecare.org.uk/your-voice/>

Accessed January 29, 2017

## Being present

Throughout this chapter you will have realised that it is not enough to simply learn some techniques to create a presence in the classroom. You need to take time to build relationships with your learners and get to know them and how they respond to you. Rodgers and Raider-Roth define presence in teaching as:

*a state of alert awareness, receptivity, and connectedness to the mental, emotional, and physical workings of both the individual and the group in the context of their learning environments, and the ability to respond with a considered and compassionate best next step. (2006, p.266).*



## Discussion activity

Read the definition from Rodgers and Raider-Roth (2006). What do you think this means in terms of:

- your view of yourself as the teacher in the classroom;
- the way you interact with the pupils in your class;

- the way you structure your learning activities;
- the way you manage the classroom;
- the way you set up the learning environment?

Think about your own practice. Reflect upon how you can change any habits or practices which hinder that opportunity to be 'connected' to all aspects of the pupil's learning development.

This definition has many implications for practitioners, especially in a primary classroom. This quotation challenges us to ensure we know our pupils as individuals and the dynamics of those individuals as a class: to be sensitive and aware of any changes that may affect pupils in our care and respond to that appropriately. Schön (1983) calls this 'reflection in action': being able to think about what is happening in the here and now, and what would be the most effective action. You will also notice in the quotation that these authors use words such as 'compassionate'. The importance of our engagement with pupils on a human level, rather than being so preoccupied with getting from the beginning to the end of our plan, can set us apart as teachers who are really able to respond to our pupils and ensure they are progressing in all aspects. As Rodgers and Raider-Roth term it, to *be* present.

These authors do state explicitly that they do not agree that teaching can be reduced to a series of behaviours or techniques (p.266) but that their concept of presence (as defined above) makes the difference in the classroom. They identify four dimensions of presence:

- self-awareness or connection to the self;
- connection to students;
- connection to subject matter and pedagogical knowledge;
- the context or current situation.

## Implications of the four dimensions

If we take these four dimensions as essential aspects of our professional practice, then there are skills that we need to develop beyond those that often appear in lists of professional competencies. The dimensions appear to be essential for developing that classroom presence where pupils take notice, not because you are using techniques and dramatic actions to gain attention, but because the pupils have developed respect for you and want to listen to what you have to say. This is something that takes time and has to be part of the professional identity that you develop. To build that trust and respect, pupils need to see that you are able to manage your own emotions and present a safe environment. Daniel Goleman (2006) in his book *Emotional Intelligence* identifies the importance of managing our own emotions and knowing ourselves well so that we are able to respond and behave in a measured and calm way, while still being true to ourselves. This is where there is a difference between *having presence* and *being present*. Having presence is about presenting yourself

in a particular way, but it is very difficult to maintain that persona if your genuine thoughts, feelings and emotions are not in line with your outward expression. For example, you may be feeling very anxious and worried about a situation (perhaps it is an observation by your mentor). You can use techniques such as those suggested in previous sections of this chapter, and we know from the research that these are helpful techniques to influence and communicate with our class, but maintaining that character or persona can drain our energy and make us feel detached from what is really happening. This is especially true if we have to maintain this false persona over a long period of time. Pupils in our primary classes are with us for significant periods of time and will see the inconsistencies. Korthagen and Vasalos (2009), who perpetuate this definition of presence being explored in this section in their work, say that true presence is part of a 'u' model: it starts with self-reflection and self-knowledge – they call this 'open mind, open heart, open will' (p.9) – this leads to presence (as defined by Rodgers and Raider-Roth) and this enables the individual to be open in responding to situations and problems.

In summary, these authors believe that rather than learning dramatic poses and adjusting non-verbal communication, genuine behaviours and actions will flow from a reflective practitioner who brings their genuine self to the classroom, who has developed openness and an understanding of how they can just *be*. This extract from Meijer *et al.* (2009) demonstrates how a trainee teacher has this realisation during a mentoring conversation. 'Paulien' has been struggling with establishing presence in the classroom and has been using a reflection model, supported by coaching conversations with Angelo, to support her development. Here she has a significant breakthrough in her understanding of teacher presence in the classroom:

*Paulien (trainee teacher): I do believe that I am much more, that more and more I learn to **genuinely be**. It gives such a happy feeling [laughs]. It specifically comes to me in sudden realizations. Then there is this sudden insight and then BANG, **I am**. Something like that. Then I'm very aware of, well, yes, of me.*

*Angelo (mentor): And what does this mean to you, when you teach from this sense of being, or, being a teacher who's able to teach from her inner sense of being? Imagine you would always be able to teach from your sense of being, your inner self? What would this mean?*

*Paulien: Well, it would save so much of your energy. If you're really yourself – I know it's strange, but it's really hard to be yourself – but if you finally succeed in being yourself, everything just comes naturally. But I find it very difficult, when I lose touch with myself, to reconnect with myself.*

Meijer *et al.* (2009, p.306)



## Reflection and discussion activity

Read the extract above between Paulien and Angelo. There are some interesting ideas here that you can start to think about and discuss with your mentor:

- What does it mean as a teacher to 'genuinely be', as Paulien describes? Angelo begins to unpick this description by saying that it is 'teach(ing) from your sense of being'. What does this concept mean to you?

- Paulien says that when she loses touch with herself it is very difficult to reconnect. This can be interpreted as those moments in teaching when we no longer feel relaxed, or that we are able to be ourselves in the classroom because of the different pressures and distractions. Think about a situation you have had in the classroom where you have felt similar to Paulien. What were the barriers, or distractions? In those situations, how can you reconnect?



## Chapter summary

Within this chapter, we have thought about techniques you can use to engage learners by having an enthusiastic persona, using positive non-verbal body language and portraying an open approach to your classroom management. We have looked at some research in the first part of the chapter which suggests some effective non-verbal behaviours to support your delivery, such as open hand gestures and a good posture. We have thought about the significance of confidence, or presenting as confident until you are able to genuinely interact with your class from a place of personal security in your own competence (*fake it 'til you make it*). Finally, we have been challenged to think about teacher presence from a different perspective, away from techniques. The important place of genuine interactions (rather than a performance) and developing relationships where influence is based upon mutual respect. This type of presence takes time to build and develop, which is why I have presented in this chapter these two perspectives. Techniques can help us make initial impressions with our class (which are so important) and can help us communicate in an interesting and engaging way. However, this type of performance can quickly fade, so it is paramount that teacher presence in the long term is built upon relationships, genuine compassion for your learners and a flexibility to respond to the circumstance and in the moment.

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