

Essay Review

Living the Ideals of Holistic Education

by Katherine Simon

Like so many others, I became a teacher to share the joy of learning and growing, to help nurture in young people humanity, creativity, and thoughtfulness. But in my high school classroom, I found myself compromising in many of the ways that TheodoreSizer (1984) has written about—trying, but not fully succeeding in keeping my heart open to the 160 kids I saw each day; trying, but not fully succeeding in creating an atmosphere of trust and risk-taking and laughter; trying, but not fully succeeding in finding ways to share the powerful essence of the literature we read, rather than quizzing kids about who said what to whom in scene three.

Like so many others, I left teaching after five years, tired, frustrated, but eager to find a different platform from which to try to contribute, eager to think about how the system might be changed so that school would be a glorious adventure of heart and mind for students and teachers. I have since learned much more than I knew as a teacher about progressive and holistic education. I have taught and observed classrooms in many settings—primarily working with student teachers and practicing teachers—seeking to share some of the approaches that have the potential to make teaching and learning more about joy and discovery than about drudgery and obligation. And many times, like so many other former schoolteachers, I have thought, “Shall I go back? Perhaps now I could make it work?” No single idea has made that idea as intriguing for me as Marshall Rosenberg’s Nonviolent Communication (NVC) process.

The NVC process holds the promise of fundamentally changing our experience as teachers, the experience of our students, and the norms of education more broadly. Highly compatible with the key values of progressive and holistic education, the ideas of NVC are much more specific than others I’ve seen about how we can interact in the moment with groups and individuals in ways that are in harmony with our deepest values.

I know that I want to meet every person I encounter with the genuine presence that Nel Noddings (1992) calls “caring.” I know that as a teacher and a parent, I want to see the beauty in each child even when he is yelling, refusing, or fighting. And I know, as a teacher, that it is crucial to connect the subjects I teach to the interests of my students. But I have often not known how to do these things in a given moment. How do I stay present and open when I am sad, hurt, or frustrated? How do I stay connected when the other person isn’t listening or doesn’t seem to care about what I’m talking about? What do I do when the topic I want to teach is the last thing on my students’ minds? For those of us who believe that trusting relationships and enthusiastic engagement are at the core of a powerful education, these questions demand answers.

The Nonviolent Communication process offers powerful, practical guidance for answering these questions. As others describe in this issue of *Encounter*, the process of NVC rests on the notion that if we can truly open ourselves to the feelings and needs of others and express our own, we can find our way to compassionate connection and to action that meets everyone’s needs. On one level, NVC is a language, a process of communication. Learning to speak this language revolves around mastering key distinctions between kinds of speech, including the differences between observations and judgments, feelings and thoughts, needs and

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strategies, and requests and demands. On a much deeper level, the NVC process is a spiritual practice, characterized by the belief that neither children nor adults need to be coerced-praised, rewarded, threatened, or shamed—into doing that which will enrich life for themselves or for others. This belief resonates with the core assumptions of holistic education.

Our traditional educational system, on the contrary, operates on the belief that education is bad-tasting medicine, which children need to be forced to ingest. Hence the huge industry around “motivating” students and the endless array of carrots and sticks in the form of grades, awards, academic probations, and the like. Like other holistic educators, Rosenberg sees learning as an intrinsic human need, one which children will strive to fulfill—if learning does not conflict with other of their basic needs, such as autonomy, respect, choice, and play.

But Rosenberg’s Nonviolent Communication process goes beyond providing a vision of children as naturally curious and compassionate. It provides much needed tools, ways of thinking and relating that can help us more fully walk our talk-keeping focused on connection, even in moments of alienation, and exploring the hidden possibilities that arise when we manage to stay fully present with one another. It provides a clear process through which students and teachers can discover together how to teach and learn in ways that honor our whole selves-and bring out the best in ourselves and each other.

So what has all of this to do with the practice of teaching? While most of us deeply desire to preserve connection, we are not used to empathizing with others’ feelings and needs or with expressing our own without attack or blame. It’s not the language that we speak; it’s not the habit of heart that we’ve learned. If a student has a complaint, we’re used to explaining it away or rushing to fix it. If a student looks bored, we’re used to ignoring it, blaming television, or explaining to her why she should be interested. If a student gets angry, we blame the student or his parents or the system or ourselves. It’s not our cultural norm to stay open and listen and feel and to allow the connection between us-and our shared human needs-to inspire creative responses to the discomfort.

The Nonviolent Communication process presents several moving accounts of how the process has helped bring reconciliation among people in extreme conflict and pain, including teachers and students, parents and children, spouses, and warring gang members. Most of these accounts—transcripts of conversations—are too lengthy to reprint here, but this brief summary of a longer conversation will give a sense of the sorts of transformations Rosenberg describes.

In Jerusalem, during a workshop attended by Israelis of varying political persuasions, participants used NVC to express themselves regarding the highly contested issue of the West Bank. Many of the Israeli settlers who have established themselves on the West Bank believe that they are fulfilling a religious mandate by doing so, and they are locked in conflict not only with Palestinians but with other Israelis who recognize the Palestinian hope for national sovereignty in this region. During a session, one of my trainers and I modeled empathic hearing through NVC, and then invited participants to take turns role-playing each other’s position. After twenty minutes, a settler announced her willingness to consider relinquishing her land claims and moving out of the West Bank into internationally recognized Israeli territory if her political opponents were able to listen to her in the way she had just been listened to them (p. 11).

This example suggests a particularly powerful aspect of Rosenberg’s theory: Human beings, he argues, need understanding much more than we need to get our own way about a particular strategy. The sense of being understood, in turn, creates a flexibility, which previously seemed unimaginable. At the same time, the process of striving to understand rather than to persuade or blame has an important impact on the listener, too, in that it opens one’s heart to the other. When parties in conflict seek human connection first, then creative, productive action will follow. The NVC process provides a process for seeking that connection. For this reason alone, being skilled in Nonviolent Communication would be a tremendous asset to educators in the midst of the contentious life of schools.



Beyond its value in conflict situations, the NVC process also has great potential to contribute to school design and classroom practice more generally. While the process does not spell out these implications for schools, one can imagine teachers using NVC as a lens for the study the actions of both historical and literary characters. This lens would help to reveal the humanity in these figures—even the “bad” guys- increasing the depth of students’ understanding of human actions and their motivations. At the same time, it could help us draw implications for our own lives by revealing ways in which history (or literary texts) might have unfolded differently—if the players had had the consciousness of alternatives, which NVC helps to provide. And the NVC process could provide an angle for examining pressing social issues, from questions about placing limits on scientific explorations to those about responding to terrorism and other forms of violence.

Rosenberg’s discussion of needs versus strategies makes what I believe is the most crucial contribution to the project of redesigning schooling. For Rosenberg, needs for such things as learning, autonomy, connection, play, and physical safety are at the core of our common humanity. In our normal way of thinking, we often perceive others as standing in the way of getting our needs met. Teachers may see unruly students as blocking the teachers’ needs for care and contribution. Some groups of parents may see other groups of parents as blocking their children’s access to resources. Students and teachers may see policymakers as blocking students’ needs for authentic learning. We set up opposing sides, seeking to exert our power over our opponents, rather than finding strategies that would allow all of us to exercise what Rosenberg calls “power with.” Rosenberg argues that on the level of our human needs, we differ very little; apparently opposing sides in fact have hugely overlapping needs and so need not work in opposition to one another. Understanding the needs motivating others’ actions reveals to us our shared humanity, helping us transcend judgment and blame and work together to devise strategies that address the needs of all sides. (Rosenberg explores these themes more fully in *Life-Serving Education*, which is written specifically for educators and scheduled for publication next year by PuddleDancer Press.)

NVC provides a language and a sensibility that have great potential to help us create a different way of relating to one another, to move from what Eisler (2000) and others have called a domination system of education to what Rosenberg calls a “life-serving” system. I am hopeful that Rosenberg’s book will inspire diverse communities of educators to learn and practice NVC—to see whether, if we adopted the consciousness and practice of nonviolent communication, we would be more able to design schools that nurture both teachers and students in their wholeness.

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From the bedroom to the boardroom, from the classroom to the war zone, the Nonviolent Communication (NVC) process is changing lives every day. NVC provides an easy to grasp, effective method to get to the root of conflict, violence and pain peacefully. By examining the unmet needs behind what we do or say, the NVC process helps reduce hostility, heal pain, and strengthen professional or personal relationships.

The NVC process is now being taught in corporations, classrooms, prisons and mediation centers around the globe. And it is affecting cultural shifts as institutions, corporations and governments integrate NVC consciousness into their organizational structures and their approach to leadership.

International peacemaker, mediator, author and founder of the Center for Nonviolent Communication, Dr. Marshall Rosenberg spends more than **250** days each year teaching the NVC process, including some of the most impoverished, war-torn areas of the world. More than **180** certified trainers and hundreds more teach this life-enriching process in **35** countries to approximately **250,000** people each year.

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