

# Democratic Educators as Compassionate Communicators

by Thomas E. Kelly

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**A commitment to democratic empowerment requires  
compassionate interactions between teachers and students.**

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Educators committed to democratic empowerment are persistently called upon to transcend narrow conceptions of teachers as classroom disciplinarians and instructional technicians. In light of conflicting, often toxic, influences on students' lives, democratic educators tend to embrace multiple roles, including co-investigators of civic issues, co-creators of caring classrooms, and public advocates for societal justice.

Sensitive to these roles, Marshall Rosenberg, a psychologist, teacher and international peace negotiator, focuses, in particular, on the quality of relationship teachers establish with their students. While there are many dimensions of students' (and their own) lives over which teachers may have little direct influence, Rosenberg notes that teachers do have maximal responsibility for determining how they will interact with students. To maximize mutual fulfillment, that interaction might be based on what Rosenberg calls compassionate or nonviolent communication. This mode of communication is based on the following assumptions and central principles:

- Most students want what teachers themselves want. These importantly include wanting to express themselves honestly and to feel safe doing so, to be understood in their own terms, to be trusted to exercise their autonomy, and to be provided opportunity to contribute to the welfare of others.
- The more students experience satisfaction of these wants, the more they will display them willingly, with response-ability.
- For complex cultural, structural, interpersonal and psychological reasons, the messages that many students' experience contradict these basic needs and wants. That is, students often feel intimidated, misunderstood, mistrusted, and manipulated. They then act in ways that can obscure or skew these needs and wants (i.e., they lie, remain silent, become submissive or rebellious, appear selfish).
- Teachers might be wise to anticipate the presence of these negative dynamics in students, and to take concrete positive action to counteract them, because interactions that contradict or fail to be responsive to the students' needs/wants discussed above will tend to reinforce the negative dynamics.

Equipped with these assumptions about common need, getting what you give, and the backdrop of a toxic and mystifying environment, compassionate and practical teachers might consider interacting with students in honest, empathetic, invitational, and collaborative ways. If they do, they will forthrightly share their own feelings, needs, and precious values; and they will seek to understand those dimensions in students. In words

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and actions, they will communicate in a language of request, not demand; power with, not power over. As much as possible, and especially in cases of student-teacher disagreement, teachers will be “heavy listeners,” successfully conveying this essential message to students:

As much as I believe strongly about this matter, I am fundamentally open to your influence. I know I do not know it all. I am as committed to respecting and meeting your needs as I am to my own. As you consider my request, one based on my needs and values, I want you to know that as important to me as the request itself is a genuine willingness to honor it because you appreciate its value. Empathetically, I do not want you to comply out of fear, guilt, shame, or other similar motive, because I strongly suspect that doing so will rob you of your sense of autonomy, leave you preoccupied in potentially destructive ways with this loss, and, overall, decrease your desire to contribute to the welfare of others.

There is another vital part of this message that needs to be sent. It speaks to the false dichotomy between authoritarianism and permissiveness, or, put differently, between “you must do what I say/demand” and “you may do anything you please.” The essence of the message is as follows:

I also need to make something very clear. I do not want you to confuse my desire for a respectful, warm, feeling relationship with my unwillingness to be a victim or to let others be victims. If, for example, your behavior is physically or verbally abusive, I may need to use force to stop your continued abuse. I need for you to understand that any such force is protective, not punitive. It will be exercised with the greatest care and restraint, and accompanied by my sincere attempt to understand from you the needs and feelings involved in your behavior. I never intend to punish or harm you, because I realize it does you a profound disservice, pollutes our relationship and is generally counterproductive; that is, you will be less, not more, likely to act willingly in compassionate ways.

Being optimally compassionate in the spirit suggested here involves considerable vulnerability and trust, strength and restraint. In hierarchical and repressive structures supported by a culture of competitive individualism, the availability and apparent necessity of punitive power is ever-present. Living in these conditions is hardly ideal for being honest, empathic, invitational, and collaborative. If the set of assumptions described here reflects reality, then being compassionate can be, simultaneously, the most practical and best way to be in relationship with students and others. As it reflects and responds to fundamental human needs, compassionate interaction may be highly conducive to transforming the hostility and docility characteristic of punitive systems into an empowering synergy, an energy force deeply respectful of individual autonomy and one channeled toward contributing to the welfare of others. Compassionate interpersonal relationships, by themselves, are certainly no panacea for the profound structural and cultural barriers confronting democratic transformation. Compassionate interactions with students do, though, seem to reflect the kind of spirit and response-ability that educators interested in democratic empowerment would want to embody and promote.

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**Thomas E. Kelly** is a member of the Department of Education at John Carroll University, University Heights, Ohio. This essay originally appeared in *Democracy & Education* and is reprinted, with modification, with the permission from the Institute for Democracy in Education.



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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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