Cultivating the Abilities of the Heart
Educating through a Pedagogy of Love

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Fourteenth century poet and Sufi master Hafiz (2003) suggests that love is the best topic, now and forever. Two young teachers of today, Jennifer and Brian, would agree. They commented sincerely on love, soul, and caring while becoming teachers of English as a foreign language. According to Jennifer, who loved Hafiz’s poems and the pedagogy of love when encountering them in a graduate course, “Positive emotions are essential to learning; emotions are from the mind and felt in the body, which is experienced in the spirit. The most positive part of teaching and learning occurs when love is involved” (Keith, 2016, emphasis added). Brian’s passionate words also reflect the pedagogy of love: “Students are not breathing robots that will produce output if you give them enough input. The human soul needs to be fed as much as the brain. Teachers need to create caring environments” (Rice, 2015, emphasis added).

The pedagogy of love, already understood by these young teachers, cultivates the abilities of the heart, such as wisdom, compassion, caring, and understanding. Part A below focuses on the theoretical foundations for the pedagogy of love. Part B offers multiple examples of the pedagogy of love in action. Part C offers further thoughts, including ties between the pedagogy of love and holistic education.

Part A. Theoretical Foundations for the Pedagogy of Love

This part presents five foundations of the pedagogy of love: a general theory of love, the heart as an electromagnetic energy field, the opening of the heart, uniting reason and intuition, and contemplative keys.

1. A General Theory of Love: Child and Adult Development

Love begins with the beginning of our lives. Lewis, Amini, and Lannon (2000) state in their book, A General Theory of Love, that the love between caregiver and child is the foundation of human survival and brain development. The nature of the relationship is critically important, though it might be largely unconscious.

Before a child’s development of language and conscious memory, a loving mind-to-mind relationship is vital to brain development and lifelong social well-being. If a fully attentive and loving
relationship is not present in the early years, the child’s brain will not be fully developed, causing relational problems later in life. Mind-to-mind communication occurs between the limbic (emotional) part of the brain of mother and child. The limbic part of the brain holds our mainly unconscious knowledge of how to relate to others. It has been found that healing of emotional wounds and learning in adult life can be enabled by an adult-to-adult loving relationship like that of the mother-child relationship. The limbic part of the brain can heal, grow, and learn in later life under these conditions. This part of the brain not only affects our relational skills but also has amazing problem-solving skills. Scientific experiments have illustrated that the limbic part of the brain can outperform some problem-solving skills of the conscious, rational part of the brain.

2. The Heart as an Electromagnetic Energy Field

The heart is an electromagnetic energy field, in which positive energies can emerge for the benefit of humans, all other creatures, our planet, and the cosmos. Sustained by the electromagnetic field that is the heart, the pedagogy of love involves teaching love, embodying love, and teaching through love. Einstein, Gandhi, and Martin Luther King, Jr. described the nature and power of love as a force in the world. In the heart are many abilities that can be cultivated, and the greatest is love, which infuses all others.

The Chinese character for mind, or more appropriately translated as heart-mind, is an image of the heart: 心 symbolizing a unitary concept of mind and body. Taoists think of the heart as an electromagnetic field originating in the Tao that coordinates and regulates the energy, physiological, and emotional function of all the other organs. It is through cultivation and adjustment of one’s heart that one achieves internal and external harmony with other. The idea that the heart is an energetic source that connects to and influences other people has been confirmed through scientific investigation (McCraty, 2004, 2015). The Tao is the primordial energy field that is integrated with spirit, information and matter, that propels life and connects, and that is love, compassion, yielding, softness, and giving. In Taoist thinking, the self is viewed as in a process of exchange of powerful, life-nurturing energies with others and the cosmos (Roth, 1999). This view has similarities with quantum understanding, which holds that all phenomena are interrelated and that they exchange information and energy (Capra, 1991).

As Zhang (1999) explains, Chinese medical philosophy unites emotions and energy. The heart generates fire energy, which is united with love and loving kindness. The heart enables the whole body to circulate qi (prana in Hindu, Ki in Japanese) and oxygen, propelling blood and qi to all the organs and various parts of the body. The loving heart is a force that can pull people together, and a heart that lacks love pushes people away. That is one reason why humans are so negatively affected by violence, that is, the lack of love.

Because the heart is an electromagnetic field, cultivating the abilities of the heart is to open ourselves to others and to cultivate reciprocal relationships. Information about a person’s emotional state is encoded in the heart’s electromagnetic field and is communicated throughout the body and into the external environment. Psycho-physiological information can be encoded into the electromagnetic fields produced by the heart. There is a direct relationship between the heart-rhythm patterns and the frequency spectra of the magnetic field radiated by the heart. Thus, information about a person’s emotional state is encoded in the heart’s electromagnetic field and is communicated throughout the body and into the external environment. Interactions between and among humans are affected by subtle yet influential electromagnetic communication systems.

The Heart Math Institute has found that the emotional state of people is reflected in their heartbeats, and this is unconsciously perceived by others through the electromagnetic field generated by the heart (McCraty, 2015). Therefore, before we can teach love we need to practice love. We can cultivate love for ourselves by practicing self-compassion (self-love) and self-awareness; admitting
mistakes; meditating; engaging in counseling; doing yoga, qigong, tai qi, or dance; and journaling or doing other forms of writing. We can foster compassion toward others and know ourselves better by being vulnerable; deepening relationships; listening non-judgmentally and speaking without expectation; practicing humility; participating in dialogue, group discussions, group therapy, and healing circles; and contributing to supportive, compassionate teamwork toward a single goal.

Schwartz (2007) argues that “everything is ultimately energy” (p. 45). He contends that the heart and mind are linked, and our emotions and cognitions produce electromagnetic forces, albeit subtle. He found that one person’s heart energy registers in another person’s brain. He discovered that the degree of people’s experience of having been loved and cared for by a parent predicted their ability to receive others’ heart energy.

Given the hatred and conflicts that have built up in society over time, we need the courage to love unconditionally, like a parent with a newborn, and teach with the pedagogy of love. Our challenge is to drop our expectations and judgments of others and to care and love unconditionally. It is said that our historical time is ready for a shift to deep inner learning and an approach to life that, compared to today’s approach, is slower, softer, nuanced, insightful, intuitive, patient, empathetic, and spirit-based. We hope that the shift will come. Our energy of love can help the educational paradigm to shift from domination, competition, hierarchy, and control to cooperation, interdependence, care, and reconciliation.

### 3. The Opening of the Heart

The pedagogy of love enables the opening of the heart-mind. The Taoist Wuwei opens the heart-mind, releases the universal love deeply embedded in our collective unconscious mind, and strengthens the heart’s ability to feel and give love. Opening the heart and cultivating relationships necessarily involve compassion, which is among the “three treasures” of Taoism (see, e.g., Mair, 1990). Similarly, in Buddhism, meditative practices, interpersonal generosity, and compassion help the heart to open. The opening of the heart metaphorically requires the caring encouragement of light, which reduces fear, according to Hafiz (1999), the poet we met earlier.

Palmer (2009) says that a broken heart can become a truly open heart. Using a magnificent image, he says, “Imagine that small, clenched fist of a heart ‘broken open’ into largeness of life, into greater capacity to hold one’s own and the world’s pain and joy” (Palmer, 2009, p. 6). To hold another person’s pain and joy involves empathy, which is a necessary capability of a teacher using the pedagogy of love. Empathy is an other-oriented response containing a constellation of caring emotions tied to the perceived welfare of someone else. Empathy involves feeling the other person’s emotions, sensing his or her needs, and in some instances non-judgmentally understanding the person’s strengths and weaknesses. To have empathy with others, teachers optimally must have enough courage and self-understanding to recognize their own emotions, needs, strengths, and weaknesses (Brown, 2010).

Empathy can be deepened when the individual has developed emotional intelligence (EI). EI, like empathy, is related to an open heart. EI is the “ability to understand feelings in the self and others and to use these feelings as informational guides for thinking and action” (Salovey, Mayer, Caruso, & Yoo, 2011, p. 238). Research shows that EI can reduce anxiety and conflict, improve relationships, and increase harmony, achievement, and motivation (Goleman, 2005). The best teachers, those who teach with the pedagogy of love, are empathetic and emotionally intelligent, and they have become that way through the opening of the heart.

Yet what if a broken heart refuses to open and remains caked with hatred? What if the heart is dominated by violence and hate? True example: A bitter young man seeking to be a teacher says loudly, “If minorities can’t learn in my classroom, they can get THE F*** out. Minorities are worthless, and they should die” (verbatim).² The antidote to this is love. “Hatred paralyzes life; love releases
it. Hatred confuses life; love harmonizes it. Hatred darkens life; love illuminates it” (King, 1963, in Couch, 2011, p. 4). Brown and Miller (in progress) describe ongoing group campus meditation and refer to Eros as a heartfelt connection and a heart space, where a loving momentum thrives. If facilitated well, such meditation might cultivate a heart space for all, even a bitter person. Individual, ongoing work with a compassionate therapist or teacher might also help. Sooner or later, working on projects with people from minority groups might be valuable. These processes might eventually build a heart space marked by openness, acceptance, and even love and empathy.

4. Uniting Reason and Intuition

According to Einstein (1918/2017),

There is no logical path to these laws [of the universe]; only intuition, resting on sympathetic understanding of experience, can reach them. . . . The state of mind that enables a man to do work of this kind is akin to that of the religious worshipper or the lover; the daily effort comes from no deliberate intention or program, but straight from the heart.

(p. 2)

Thus, Einstein, the icon of Western science, credits the discoveries of science to the heart, to intuition, and to something akin to worshipping and loving, rather than to Enlightenment-born reason, logic, analysis, reductionism, detachment, materialism, critical thinking, objectivism, and measurement, which are favored in much of modern education (Palmer, Zajonc, with Scribner, 2014; Zajonc, 2006). However, it is not necessary to forsake science. Zajonc (2006) calls for resituating science “within a greater vision” of knowing and living (p. 2), a perspective that includes reason but also encompasses intuition and all other abilities of the heart.

5. Contemplative Keys to the Pedagogy of Love

The pedagogy of love can foster peak experiences (Maslow, 1971), which come from experiencing something ordinary as extraordinary. A peak experience is

a great and mystical experience, a religious experience if you wish – an illumination, a revelation, an insight. . . [leading to] “the cognition of being.” . . . the cognition that Plato and Socrates were talking about; almost, you could say, a technology of happiness, of pure excellence, pure truth, pure goodness.

(p. 169)

Peak experiences are especially joyous, exciting, ego-transcending moments involving sudden feelings of intense love, empathy, awe, happiness, ecstasy, creativity, well-being, wonder, and timelessness. Peak experiences can happen in the classroom, in nature (seeing a sunset, brilliant autumn leaves, or a sparkling river), at home, or with friends, when dancing or listening to music, and in countless other circumstances. Rebecca and her graduate students have had peak experiences through art, telling stories of our transformative learning (see later), and reading poetry together.

Matthew Fox’s (2014) concept of “deep education” echoes many of the ideas of the pedagogy of love, and is actively contemplative. Deep education is aimed at wisdom, which involves love, compassion, creativity, intuition, imagination, and engagement, and is linked with wonder and awe (“radical amazement”). The emphasis on wisdom in Fox’s deep education comes from Meister Eckhart’s Wisdom Schools in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Eckhart combined education, wisdom, and spiritual psychology (Oxford, 2016). Deep education involves both sides of the brain,
the logical and rational left hemisphere and the artistic and intuitive right hemisphere. Similarly, contemplative inquiry is a key to what Zajonc (2006) calls the “epistemology of love,” which includes the stages of respect, caring, gentleness, intimacy, vulnerability, transformation (containing insight, which can be great enough to be an epiphany), and peace.4

We have discussed five foundations of the pedagogy of love. Now we turn to concrete illustrations of the pedagogy of love in action.

Part B. Diverse Examples of the Pedagogy of Love in Action

Here we offer authentic examples of the pedagogy of love. First, Tom leads meditations in his business ethics courses. Second, he develops self-compassion and admits mistakes. Third, Jing teaches with mindfulness. Fourth, Rebecca’s students discuss transformative learning.

1. Tom Leads Meditations in Business Ethics Courses

In my instruction of business ethics, I utilize a class of attentional meditations that train mental processes related to the regulation of attention to assist students to know themselves better, a foundation of ethics. This includes two types of meditation: focused attention and open monitoring (Dahl, Lutz, & Davidson, 2015). Focused attention involves narrowing attention to a single object, while open monitoring involves expanding attention to one’s internal flow of perceptions, thoughts, emotional content, and/or subjective awareness. The key attribute of this class is the “systematic training of the ability to intentionally, initiate, direct, and/or sustain these attentional processes while strengthening the capacity to be aware of the processes of thinking, feeling, and perceiving” (p. 3). While apparently a very self-oriented activity meditation, this paradoxically has the effect of transforming one’s relationship with others and potentially broadening one’s worldview.

Relationships are transformed because, according to neuroscience research, people who meditate 15 minutes a day or more are better able to regulate their emotions. Rather than impulsively acting on emotions, they are able to know how they feel and choose how to respond, which can have a powerfully positive effect on relationships with other people. According to ancient Taoist texts, those who meditate gain access to universal knowledge that resides within each person. This influences the person to take a broader, less self-centered, and perhaps more other-caring perspective. When students are engaged in meditation focusing on a positive emotional experience of the past several weeks, they commonly report feeling lighter, more open, and expansive. Instead of rushing to get a coffee after arriving at the university, one student mentioned they now stop and simply breathe in the morning fresh air.

2. Tom Learns Self-Compassion and Admits Mistakes

The gift of self-compassion is part of the pedagogy of love. This gift comes when one recognizes that all human beings have strengths and weaknesses and that we ourselves are not perfect (Brown, 2010). Acceptance of ourselves as we are lets us admit mistakes without feeling like failures and reduces the power of others over us because we cannot be shamed into actions we might later regret. We can admit mistakes if we know we do not have to be perfect. The best way to teach self-compassion and admitting mistakes is to serve as a role model.

I can attest to this experience. I was brought up with the message that making mistakes shows that I can’t be counted on, that I am not good enough, and probably worse. Thus, admitting mistakes in life or to a class was something I had great difficulty doing, and when I made a mistake I felt very embarrassed and deflated. These emotions have lessened, but to some extent they still have a hold on me. Now, however, I can and do admit my mistakes or failings in class settings and have found
it to be liberating for me. Modeling of this kind of vulnerability is also helpful to my students. It has helped me to be able to provide positive feedback to students and support their efforts to experiment and learn through trial and error in class interactions. The feedback I get from students is that they feel comfortable saying what they think and believe in my classes rather than saying what they think I want to hear.

3. Jing Teaches with Mindfulness

I designed my summer class to incorporate the concepts of Roth (2006): third-person inquiry, laboratory or inner work, and critical first-person reflection. Roth also calls for opening the heart and freeing the intuition through meditation, music, dance, and other means. We used some of these modes. I emphasized mindfulness and presence, involving being attentive to students’ questions and being present when students share their problems. A body scan exercise helped students connect with the baby and the body. Students participated in a forgiveness exercise; a peace dance for transforming violence; a compassion exercise; yoga and tai chi for unifying the body, mind, and energy; and an experience of education as healing. One student walked the Labyrinth, thus stimulating compassion, understanding, and reconciliation.

4. Rebecca’s Students Discuss Transformative Learning

In a setting of love, I teach the course “Adult Learning” to pre-service and in-service teachers. They are especially interested in exploring their own transformative learning (Merriam & Bierema, 2014). One class member, L., a kindergarten teacher in a small Alabama town, said that before her transformative learning experience, she accepted local beliefs about undocumented workers: that they steal American jobs and are stupid, disrespectful, uncivilized, socially ignorant, dirty, and possibly dangerous. However, transformative learning opened her heart toward these new neighbors and demolished stereotypes. Transformation occurred gradually through taking diversity courses, meeting undocumented workers, teaching their children, helping them with food and clothing, and inviting them over for holiday festivities. L. is now a caring advocate who, along with her church, strengthens the town’s newfound commitment to social justice. Sharing individual transformative learning experiences both echoes and enhances the pedagogy of love pervading the graduate class.

Part C. Further Thoughts

This chapter has explained the pedagogy of love in terms of cultivating the abilities of the heart. We addressed five foundations: (a) a general theory of love, (b) the heart as an electromagnetic field of energy, (c) the opening of the heart, (d) the uniting of reason and intuition, and (e) contemplative keys to the pedagogy of love. In the process, we revealed that love is the language of the emotional limbic system. Love powers transformative learning for different ages. Treating students with humility and respect and guiding them to treat others similarly are important to the pedagogy of love. The pedagogy of love shows students as equal souls, the purposes of which can be fostered by at education. To teach with love, we must love ourselves and embody the pedagogy of love. “We teach who we are” (Palmer with Scribner, 2017, p. 102).

The question arises: How is holistic education related to the pedagogy of love? Denton and Ashton (2004) call readers to explore the loving heart of holistic education. Denton (2005) refers to being “in the flame,” where teaching, spirituality, and compassion co-occur in holistic education. Holistic education aims for the integration of four aspects of the person: heart, body, mind, and spirit. As we have seen, the pedagogy of love helps cultivate the abilities of the heart. Heart-cultivation through the pedagogy of love necessarily relates to the other three aspects of holistic education.
education: the body (e.g., embodied learning), the mind (e.g., mindfulness and mindful learning), and the spirit (e.g., spiritual learning). The pedagogy of love and holistic education have so much in common that it is difficult to separate them, and for that we are very glad.

Notes
1 When they made the comments in this paragraph, Jennifer and Brian were students in Rebecca’s graduate teacher education courses. Jennifer now teaches in China, and Brian teaches for the Peace Corps in South America.
2 This occurred in a nearly all-white state university in the American Midwest. The student’s professor shared the story with one of us and asked what to do.
3 Also see Miller (2009, in press) for wonderful ideas about education and Eros.
4 Another stage, formation or Bildung, is no longer in the model (Palmer & Zajonc with Scribner, 2014).

References


