



## Where the Spiritual Meets the Material: Rebalancing the 21st Century Classroom

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### Abstract

*The material is represented by the physical and virtual world (including the effects of machine learning and smart technology that present pre-packaged decisions to us). The spiritual is represented by our inner voice - the words that come into our heads when our minds stop talking. However, it needs nurturing, encouragement, and role-modelling. How do we encourage teachers to have the confidence to tune into their spiritual voice? And in so doing, how can they model for students how to remain in charge of the decisions and preferences that frame their lives? When preparing classroom lessons for my Grade 8 students, I frontload (plan in advance) the lesson by visualizing their most predictable behaviours and reactions. However, once the lesson begins, I let go of the presuppositions that come along with frontloading. This way, nothing interferes with stilling my mind so that my spiritual voice can speak through me to the students. This means letting go of executive control and trusting that everything said will come from a place of love (which children will naturally intuit). I will reference Dr. Paul Ekman's research on micro-expressions, and his discussions with the Dalai Lama about the bridging of the spiritual and material world. I will also discuss whether statement analysis can be applied here as a qualitative research method.*

**Keywords:** *Spiritual, material, micro-expressions, statement analysis, voice.*

### Introduction

The etymology of the word “spirit” stems from the idea of respiration, of breathing itself. We have then the sense of animation, of life, within the idea of spirituality. In French, to say that someone has “un bon esprit” is to describe them as being full of life; to be present in the moment. What is the moral reason justifying being present in the moment, and how can a teacher model this for their students? I will argue that this is the way to educate compassion. I will suggest as a lesson plan template using frontloading (the preparation and visualization in advance) and statement analysis (the evaluation afterwards) for this educational method.

Frontloading lesson plans reduces our cognitive load during the lesson itself, enabling our spiritual voices to speak in the classroom more clearly. For this educational method to work, we also need a bookend that functions as feedback to ourselves, as well as an evaluative method for our students' progress. Statement analysis, although originally developed in order to determine truth-telling based on the exact words suspects state, could be used as a qualitative method to review students' compassionate growth. I like this idea because typically we tend to think of compassion as absolute, as opposed to being on a trajectory between lesser and greater.

### 1. Spirituality

As teachers, we are responsible for modelling behaviours for our students. One behaviour which is hard to quantify, but which students are astutely good at sensing, is having a still mind and a clear spiritual voice. This is when our voice and body movements are guided by an inner-animated spontaneity (as well as receptivity to our environment) without interference from our narrative consciousness. The longer we can ride out chunks of time in class where our spirit breathes, the more likely it is that the students will begin to resonate similarly and feel enough trust to let their own spirits breathe too. This is not the only way for a classroom's spiritual voice to breathe; a teacher who deliberately chooses to ignore their students, who does not care for their suffering, may induce a collective reaction where their spiritual voice speaks out to be heard and respected. I would argue though that modelling spirituality is a healthier longer term way to bring out their spiritual voices in a continuous manner, rather than provoking a self-defence of their selves.



How do we gain the confidence to let our spiritual voice speak? The answer is through a personal journey. My own largely came through making music with others. I noticed that the more my mind was clear and empty, the better we played. The more cluttered my mind was with narrative thoughts, the less our music was in sync with each other. This synchronicity was measured by sympathetic shifts in our dynamics and musical pulse, and often to quite dramatic effect.

## 2. Compassion

Based on dialogues between the Dalai Lama and Dr. Paul Ekman [1], I believe that frontloading lesson plans to enable our spiritual voices to speak in the classroom will create an atmosphere where higher levels of compassion will develop. In these dialogues, the Dalai Lama argues that with every advance of technology comes also a cost of greater violence. He cites the 20th century as an example of this. What if we extrapolate his reasoning and apply it to the 21st century? We see a world where machine-learning and AI takes over more and more of our decisions (such as what music to listen to, and what turns of phrases to use when texting and emailing). Over time, our spiritual voice risks being suffocated by the noise of the material world telling us what our preferences ought to be. This may seem like a suitable trade-off in small doses for greater conveniences, but there is a real risk of losing our spiritual voice completely. If dead, so goes with it any assurance of compassion for all sentient beings and our efforts to prevent suffering.

Dr. Paul Ekman argues that we have 5 levels of compassion. These are: 1. Familial (given to us by nature itself to feel compassion to our immediate family members) 2. Familiars (those people that through proximity are familiar to us; such as neighbours) 3. Stranger constrained (people of the same nationality or tribe) 4. Global compassion (a sense of compassion for all other human beings in the world) 5. All sentient beings (feeling compassion for anything that can suffer). From this, he argues that our compassion stems from two places within us; proximal (immediate and emotional based) and distal (thinking/social forecasting based on wisdom). Notably, the absence of distal compassion is marked by a sense of narrow-mindedness.

The Dalai Lama offers a simpler way to view these distinct levels of compassion as going from biased to unbiased compassion. The seed of biased compassion comes from the sense of attachment. The more closely attached we feel to someone, the more biased is our compassion. (Tellingly, he emphasizes the word “my” when describing “my mother”.) A “genuine sense of concern of others’ well-being should not involve your own interest.” The ultimate level of unbiased compassion is to feel compassion for a person who is about to murder you. Finally, he offers a parallel to distal compassion; Buddhism asks us to look at the causal conditions that create future suffering.

## 3. Frontloading

How can we plan our lessons so that our spirits are alive, that we can guide our students towards unbiased compassion, and then evaluate the results accurately? I would argue that planning requires us to visualize what typical behaviours and comments students will make to certain aspects of our lesson. How many of those do we wish to occur? How much room for chaos are we willing to allow within the lesson as well? By sitting still and visualizing (and hearing) this lesson in advance, we can begin to practice this more routinely so that it becomes a habit. For me, this happens on my commute into work each day. When I arrive at school, I make the requisite changes to my lessons based on these visualizations.

Critically, however, we must be alive to the fact that once the lesson begins, our presuppositions are impediments to our spirituality. This can feel risky. We need confidence in our students that our letting go of the reins will encourage them to pick up the slack. We are now engaged in the moment itself; if we hark back to our presuppositions, we are then actively predicting biased compassion in our students instead of offering the opportunity for the unbiased compassion to occur. Ironically, by verbalizing our concerns to our students we manifest the problems we were trying to avoid. An argument can also be made that an over-sensitivity to students’ micro-expressions could overbalance our compassion from the distal frontloading to proximal in the moment itself. Every teacher will have to weigh and review this through reflective practice.



#### 4. Statement Analysis

Statement analysis is a blossoming field of study within law enforcement which argues that analyzing the statements made by suspects is often the most effective way to figure out the likelihood that they are lying. In *I Know You Are Lying* by Mark McClish [2], the author compares the relative effectiveness of determining truth-telling between the use of non-verbals (body language) and statements for lie detection. Specifically, non-verbals can identify stress, but not necessarily what is causing it. With statement analysis, the words themselves are used as windows (albeit sometimes small!) into the brain-state of the suspect at that moment they were uttered. The types of questions asked allow us to shift the angle which we perceive through these windows.

I believe statement analysis can be used within education as a way to measure compassion. Students could write down their thoughts in compassion journals on topics specifically geared to different hierarchies of compassion based on Ekman's scale. The writing prompts could be framed to guide the students' minds over time from biased to unbiased compassion. Teachers could then conference with students to let them speak out their written thoughts and to help guide their thinking into a more compassionate framework. The conferences afterwards are vital, as they help develop the students' metacognition to recognize when they are employing proximal vs. distal heuristics, and to help self-evaluate how unbiased their compassion is. The teacher would frontload and then ask open-ended questions based on a statement analysis of the student's compassion journal. It is my opinion that it is better for the teacher not to disagree overtly with the perceived accuracy of the student's self-evaluation, as this will inhibit the student's spiritual voice. Unlike much other critical feedback, compassion is defined by its withholding of judgment.

#### Conclusion

There are opportunities here for teachers to find their own spiritual voice and to let it breathe in their classrooms. It does not have to have the goal of developing unbiased compassion in their students. It can simply be a start to hearing their students more authentically. I believe though that unbiased compassion is the inevitable result of the spiritual voice being heard, if it is guided by the distal compassion of the teacher ahead of time in their lesson planning via frontloading. As the Dalai Lama says, we must use our human intelligence to guide the biased compassion towards the unbiased. As educators, we have the opportunity to set our classroom conditions up in such a way where this can be the result. It remains to be seen whether statement analysis can be used as an effective method to evaluate the growth of compassion. The challenge will be to apply its methods to a non truth-telling rubric.

#### References

- [1] Ekman, P. and the Dalai Lama; <https://www.paulekman.com/projects/global-compassion/>
- [2] McClish, M. *I Know You Are Lying*, Harrisburg, NC, The Marpa Group, Inc, 2001