

Book review: Palmer, P. J. (2007). *The courage to teach*. San Francisco: Wiley.

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This book by Palmer would be the most influential book on teaching I have read in over 25 years. The book is posited on the idea that it is the identity of the teacher, and his/her honesty, integrity and humility, which make for successful work with students. To achieve the best for students, Palmer argues that a considerable amount of internal searching needs to happen. Teachers need to be authentically present in a classroom, creating respectful conversations between themselves and their students in which students can explore how to work in ways that best suit *them*.

Palmer does not advocate the use of techniques but locates successful teaching in the heart of the teacher, living in community with his/her students and operating in ways that demonstrate coherence with the teacher's own system of values. Teachers should work in the 'service of learning'. Before teachers can effectively assist students with content, they need to be secure in themselves, with skills and knowledge usually assisted by mentors. Once they develop this level of identity and integrity, they are best placed to create safe environments where students can learn, free from fear. They also need to be passionate about their students, their subject and teaching as a profession.

Unusually in books on pedagogy, Palmer promotes the welcoming of paradox. This, he argues, can be energising and motivating. A sound, safe classroom welcomes the paradoxes of: both bounded and open space; an environment that is both hospitable and charged; an honouring of both 'big' and 'little' stories of students, and the disciplines and traditions within which they are learning; an ability to operate individually as well as within group/community; all of which allow for both silence and speech. He draws on various types of community that might

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exist in classrooms to show the importance of community in teaching and learning, including 'therapeutic', 'civic', and 'marketing' models. The latter focuses on the notion of education as a commodity that can be purchased and hence is not recommended. However in the former two he examines the provision of and cautions about education as therapy, which can be overdone, and the civic model which can help to resolve conflicts and problems in less intimate ways. He stresses the importance of diversity in communities, and again mentions paradox and conflict and their ability to promote good educational practice. Challenging the teacher's view is part of helping students to learn on their own and to develop their own views. However, paradoxically, he also encourages co-dependence between students and teacher as a way of overcoming unequal power-dynamics.

Palmer recommends that teachers support each other in their vital work by practising sound communication with each other, learning from each other as one does in apprenticeships to a craft, and being more transparent about what they do and how they do it. He criticises the 'private' operation of much teaching, encouraging rather a sharing of good practice. Suggestions are provided about how to instigate and continue constructive dialogues. Having moved in the initial chapters from the individual teacher in his/her classroom and the communities they can build in that, Palmer expands to the wider teaching-environment. He concludes the book by suggesting ways in which teachers can create movements in order to transform society, hence moving from the micro to the macro view of education. His term 'living divided no more' draws on the case study of Rosa Parks, the African American woman whose refusal to change seats on a segregated bus was influential in provoking the Civil Rights movement in the States in the 1960s.

It is apparent throughout this book that Palmer is passionate about his own teaching; open about his weaknesses and how he has striven to overcome these; and committed to supporting the vital work of teachers wherever they practice. I warmly recommend this book to others.