
Being with People

Jim Amstutz

This is one of the tragedies in education today. We have a lot of people who don't recognize that being a teacher is being with people.

—bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*

When schools across the world shut down during the Covid pandemic, I realized within days the essence of why I teach: it's being with the students. Imparting information via Zoom could not recreate the living, breathing, shared space of my classroom. Sure, we could talk about the lesson, share anecdotes, and stay caught up with one another. But we were not *with* each other.

While on staff at Bluffton (OH) University I read Thomas Groome's *Sharing Faith: A Comprehensive Approach to Religious Education and Pastoral Ministry: The Way of Shared Praxis*.¹ This became a foundational work for my understanding of education and mission. When I began teaching at Lancaster Mennonite School (LMS)² after a career with church-related ministries and twenty-five years of pastoral ministry, I knew intuitively that simply imparting knowledge was not the goal. It was about information informed by action and reflection, plus the inspiration of the biblical story and discernment of the classroom community. That's shared praxis. Knowledge alone does not lead to wisdom unless there is analysis of power and awareness of its impact. Teaching high school juniors and seniors about church history, practical theology, and spiritual formation is most effective when we are sharing the same space.

Jim S. Amstutz teaches and coaches at Lancaster (PA) Mennonite High School following twenty-five years of pastoral ministry. He serves as a trustee at Bluffton (OH) University and chair of the Community Action Partnership Board in Lancaster. He earned a DMin degree from Fuller Theological Seminary (Pasadena, CA) in missional leadership in 2008. He is the author of "Threatened with Resurrection: Self-Preservation and Christ's Way of Peace" (Herald, 2002) and numerous articles/chapters on peacebuilding, appreciative inquiry, and missional leadership. Jim is married to Lorraine Stutzman Amstutz, and they have three adult children and four grandchildren. They attend Blossom Hill Mennonite Church in Lancaster.

¹ Thomas H. Groome, *Sharing Faith: A Comprehensive Approach to Religious Education and Pastoral Ministry: The Way of Shared Praxis* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1991).

² LMS is a private pre-K to Grade 12 school in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, with increasing racial and socioeconomic diversity.



Table 5 from fall 2021 Spiritual Formation class at Lancaster Mennonite School out for a meal before heading to college in 2022. From left to right: Sarah Steckbeck, Hiedi Gbote, Allison LePrell, Sean Swartley, and Ryan Walker.

In her book *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*, the late bell hooks reflects on how she created space for everyone in her classroom: “Making the classroom a democratic setting where everyone feels a responsibility to contribute is a central goal of transformative pedagogy. . . . Who speaks? Who listens? And why?”³ Jane⁴ spoke to me after class one day in a panic, exclaiming, “I can’t do my Capstone project!” When I asked her why, she said, “Because I’ve been homeless for almost the whole semester.”

Like countless teens across the country, Jane had been couch-surfing after her guardian kicked her out of the house for violating curfew. At the time, I was still Chair of the Lancaster County Coalition to End Homelessness and invited Jane to do her Capstone project on youth homelessness. I gave her links to data from the National Alliance to End Homelessness, and one of the guidance counselors agreed to be her mentor for the Capstone research and presentation. “On a single night,” Jane wrote, “nearly 36,000 unaccompanied youth were counted as homeless. I was one of them.” Jane found the courage to lean into her circumstance, claim her voice, and own her story. Another family at school took Jane in for the rest of the school year, and she graduated on time.

³ hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*, 39–40.

⁴ The student’s name has been changed to protect their identity.

In *Whistling Vivaldi*,⁵ social psychologist Claude Steele demonstrates the power of stereotypes and their impact on learning. His strong case for collaborative learning is one of the reasons I chose to incorporate large six-sided tables in my classrooms instead of desks. We learn from and with one another, especially when the groups are diverse. Vivian Gussin Paley writes in her insightful book *White Teacher*: “It is often hard to learn from people who are just like you. Too much is taken for granted. Homogeneity is fine in a bottle of milk, but in a classroom it diminishes the curiosity that ignites discovery.”⁶

Table groups in “Spiritual Formation,” the dual enrollment course I teach through Eastern Mennonite University (Harrisonburg, VA), function as small groups during the semester-long course at Lancaster Mennonite. I intentionally place students in groups outside of their friend group and try to balance gender, race, and socioeconomic backgrounds. I invite them to create community over time, with a common commitment to keep Christ at the center and love one another into a safe and brave space. I know that I can only *position* the students to have this experience; it cannot be forced. But when it happens, students point to that group experience and say, “I thought I knew my classmates, but now I realize we rarely share our truth at that deeper level.”

Honesty and trust can lead to vulnerability and the love shared within genuine friendships. Many table groups have stayed in touch after graduation and are intentional about getting together in person. After all, true community is situated in teaching and in being with people.

5 Claude M. Steele, *Whistling Vivaldi: How Stereotypes Affect Us and What We Can Do* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2010), 100.

6 Vivian Gussin Paley, *White Teacher* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979, 1989), 56.