ABSTRACT

This paper explores the “present moment’s” impact on teaching effectiveness and student learning. In doing so, it discusses three guiding principles that when used effectively enable a classroom to blossom into a magical place where effective learning occurs. The principles are extremely powerful in allowing the learning process to flow. They are: get present, make contact, and challenge participation. The paper also offers preliminary findings from a pilot study focused on illustrating the effectiveness of these principles and suggests the potential impact these principles will have as other teachers learn and use them to effectively guide their students’ learning.

Key Words: Present Moment, Student Learning, Teaching Effectiveness

INTRODUCTION

When I am “present” as a teacher, my classes seem to flow: my comments and questions are insightful, the students’ responses impress with their depth and perception, and our classroom environment envelopes us with joy. The students open themselves to expansive learning and I end the class knowing that education, not merely memorization, had occurred.

This teaching brief addresses my exploration of what happens in my most successful classes. It addresses the following question: How does the present moment impact teaching effectiveness and student learning? In tackling this question, it will provide three guiding principles that when used effectively enable a classroom to blossom into a magical place where effective learning occurs. The principles are very simple, yet extremely powerful in allowing the learning process to flow. They are: get present, make contact, and challenge participation (Wheeler, 2013). Next, the paper will offer preliminary findings from a pilot study focused on illustrating the effectiveness of these principles. Finally, the paper will suggest the potential impact these principles will have as other teachers learn and use them to effectively guide their students’ learning.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Our ability “to be” allows us to be who we are fully. Vaill (1996) writes that “being” refers to the whole person – to something that goes on all the time and that extends into all aspects of a person’s life; it means all levels of awareness” (p. 43). I agree; “being” allows the whole person – and all of his or her potential and possibility – to be in this moment.

Tolle (2006), writing about being, notes that “at the heart of the new consciousness lies the transcendence of thought, the newfound ability of rising above thought, of realizing a dimension within yourself that is infinitely more vast than thought” (pp. 21-22). One has to be willing to experience transcending thought if one is to begin to understand. The thinking
process continues; yet it is when we are willing to let go of our identification with thought that we open to something larger. It is then that we “tap into direct experience: that is, experience that is not filtered through our thoughts, expectations, hopes, and fears…” (Wegela, 2009, p. 26). This direct experience brings the possibility found in each moment.

Once we connect with our “being” we connect with the possibility of the three principles mentioned earlier: get present, make contact, and challenge participation (Wheeler, 2013). For the teacher, the principles lay the groundwork for class content to be taught more effectively and describe a process that parallels and upholds such teaching. By this, I mean the teacher is guided by these principles while teaching course content.

First, the teacher gets present in the moment and creates an environment where the students likewise get present. Second, the teacher makes contact with the students and the students respond. Third, the teacher challenges the students to participate. It is that simple. Yet it is also extremely powerful in terms of potential student engagement and learning.

A few others have explored the power found in the present moment and its impact on teaching and learning. Ramsey et al. (2005), distinguishing between doing and being in the classroom, highlighted three different classroom approaches: “an emphasis on teaching (doing something to students), an emphasis on teaching and learning (doing something with students), and an emphasis on learning (being with students)” (p. 335) where the emphasis on being with students involved “simply being among them” (p. 340). Yet, there is very little empirical research on the present moment and its impact on teaching effectiveness and student learning. This paper hopes to address this gap in the literature.

In this section each principle will be explored and the associated propositions will be presented. I chose to use propositions rather than hypotheses because this research is exploratory in nature and is not based on previous models (Cooper et al., 2010). A brief review of teaching effectiveness and student learning will also be provided.

**Get Present**

To “get present” means to be in this moment, here and now. When one gets present, the mind is more alert, the body is more agile, and the spirit is more expansive. Each moment we have allows for more moments to follow. Getting present is a lifelong endeavor that can happen immediately. The dichotomy of lifelong and immediate is intentional; when one is present, time seems to stop and a lifetime seems immediate.

For the teacher, getting present allows for enhanced teaching effectiveness and student learning. At least one other educator agrees:

“Teaching calls on one to be present… As an educator, I have always worked hard to maintain a sense of intentional presence, a practice that mirrors that of breathing within yoga. This is a practice that requires intention and discipline, along with deep awareness of the present moment…” (MacKenzie, 2011, p. 67).

In the literature, mindfulness, a similar concept, involves being fully present and focused (Baer et al., 2006; Brown et al., 2003; Brown et al., 2007). It allows people to think constructively (Kabat-Zinn, 1990, 1994, 2005) and have greater cognitive flexibility (Feldman et al., 2007), more control over one’s cognitive, affective, and behavioral experiences (Astin, 1997), and higher capability to deal with challenges and difficulties (Feldman et al., 2007).

Based on my own teaching experiences, I agree that mindfulness can improve student learning and teacher effectiveness. The main difference between getting present and mindfulness seems to lie in how each is done. Mindfulness is a contemplative cognitive function that quiets the mind using techniques such as meditation and yoga, while getting present involves simply awakening to this moment. We can be as active as we choose as long as we connect with this moment.
Two other apparently similar concepts, teaching immediacy and teaching presence, emerged from research on immediacy, which has been defined as “those communication behaviors that enhance closeness to and nonverbal interaction with another” (Mehrabian, 1969, p. 203). Anderson (1979) conceptualized teacher immediacy “as those nonverbal behaviors that reduce the physical/psychological distance between teacher and students” (p. 544). Garrison et al. (2000) described teaching presence as part of a proposed community of inquiry model which also includes social and cognitive presence. Teaching presence is “the design, facilitation, and direction of cognitive and social processes for the purpose of realizing personally meaningful and educationally worthwhile learning outcomes” (Arbaugh et al., 2006, p. 10).

Yet, a closer look at teaching immediacy and teaching presence shows that although both constructs are worthwhile, neither mentions using the present moment. Getting present as a teacher means waking up to the present moment—first the teacher and then the students—which allows both to be more alert and focused, ultimately increasing teacher effectiveness and student learning. It is proposed:

*Proposition 1: When the teacher is present with himself and his students, his teaching effectiveness and the students’ learning improves.*

**Make Contact**

Making contact involves connecting with ourselves first and foremost. The power of being ourselves, resting within ourselves, and making contact with ourselves is one of the greatest powers that we can possess (Tolle, 2004, 2006). As teachers, making contact with ourselves underscores our responsibility to our students; we have to connect with ourselves before we can connect with anyone else.

Making contact means different things to different people. For me, making contact means that in this moment I connect with myself, others, and the environment. First, connecting with myself allows any existing fear to be replaced with courage and any outside distractions to disappear. Next, connecting with others allows my inherent shyness to recede as I am drawn to others’ energy and who they are. Finally, connecting with my environment allows me to respect my surroundings, knowing that, in this moment, the environment and I are one.

I was unable to find any literature references beyond what has already been mentioned for making contact in the present moment and its impact on teaching effectiveness and student learning.

As a teacher, when we make contact with ourselves, we connect compassionately both with ourselves and with our students in a playful, lighthearted, and humorous fashion from moment to moment, and in a serious, forceful, and stern manner as circumstances demand. When we make contact as teachers, we accelerate the learning process. It is proposed:

*Proposition 2: When the teacher makes contact with herself and her students, her teaching effectiveness and the students’ learning improves.*

**Challenge Participation**

To challenge participation means that in this moment I engage with myself, others, and the environment, so that the class’s learning of the content is accelerated. Engaging myself allows me to push myself beyond any self-imposed limits to reach the unimagined. Engaging others allows me to invite them to be more fully open, alert, and alive. And, engaging the environment allows me to be enveloped by larger protective forces.

As I attempt to define challenge participation as a teacher, I agree with what Ramsey et al. (2005) say regarding creating a “being classroom”. Such a classroom is filled with ambiguity...
and uncertainty, which is “simultaneously frightening and exhilarating” (p. 341). It provides a place for students to "risk new behaviors and new ways of thinking and being” (p. 342), a state which emerges from a foundation of earned trust founded on “the demonstration of respect: respect for the students, who they are, and what they bring to the class; respect for oneself and one’s own limitations; and respect for the subject” (p. 342). The professor provides positive reinforcement, listens respectfully, and interacts authentically. In response, the students “see themselves as part of what is being studied and as an integral part of the process of engaging in that study” (p. 349). Learning the class material goes beyond memorization and allows the students to identify with the class concepts in “a curious and inquiring mode” (p. 342). They are able to “apply and illustrate the concepts to their own personal and professional lives” (p. 349). This identity is the connection between what the student already knows with what is being taught: this is the process of true education.

As a teacher, challenge participation means that in this moment I engage with myself, the students, and the environment so that their learning of the classroom content can be accelerated. It is proposed:

**Proposition 3:** When the teacher challenges participation with himself and his students, his teaching effectiveness and the students’ learning improves.

Teaching Effectiveness and Student Learning

Many articles address teaching effectiveness and student learning. As early as 1882 the *Journal of Education* published an article on “How to Become a Good Teacher” (Anonymous, 1882). We only have to look at journals such as *Decision Sciences Journal of Innovative Education* and the *Academy of Management Learning and Education*, which provide “outlets for dialogues on teaching and havens for those who have wanted to explore and renew their teaching competence” (Frost et al., 1997, p. 1273), to understand the importance of teaching effectiveness and student learning.

Scholars have “differing views as to what constitutes ‘effective’ teaching” (Komos, 2013, p. 133). For example, teaching effectiveness has been defined as “the process of selecting the materials, resources, teaching strategies, and assignments that have the greatest potential to contribute to student learning” (Lowman, 1996, p. 38); in terms of the teacher’s characteristics of enthusiasm and expressiveness, clarity of expression, and rapport/interaction (Murray, 1997); as a “complex, multidimensional, dynamic process affected by the individuals involved in the process as well as by the circumstances in the classroom” (Theall, 1999, p. 30); and as including the characteristics of personality, skills, subject knowledge, and reflective practice (Kane et al., 2004). Researchers associate a variety of factors with teaching effectiveness, including developing high order learning processes in students (Biggs, 2003), recognizing the impact of social, economic, and political factors (Campbell et al., 2004; Hopkins et al., 2001; Mortimore, 1998), and measuring the impact that teacher characteristics, teacher expectations, and the learning environment have on students’ achievement (Allan et al., 2009).

Just as teaching effectiveness is important, so too is student learning. As a teacher I am continually working to improve my classroom techniques. I echo what Dean et al., (2012) wrote about constantly looking for “insights into what impacts student learning and engagement with classroom material” (p. 228). A very recent article talks about the necessary components to insure effective student learning: “(a) teaching competence (knowledge of content and teaching), (b) relationships with students (having the best interests of students at heart), and (c) teacher attitudes (with respect to teaching and learning)” (Hill, 2014, p. 57). Further, the author mentions the students’ need for “an opportunity to practice” what is being taught (Hill, 2014, p. 57). From my perspective, teaching effectiveness and student learning are very much related.
For this study, teaching effectiveness and student learning are defined as teaching and students' efforts that allow the students to understand the course content, practice what is being taught, and apply immediately the relevant course concepts to their lives.

**METHODOLOGY**

A preliminary inductive theory-building study focusing on how the present moment positively impacts teacher effectiveness and student learning was conducted. The perspectives of both teachers and students were gathered to provide an understanding of the interplay of the experiences that influence teacher effectiveness and student learning. Existing theoretical perspectives, although plentiful, lack a statistical, research-based examination of the impact of the present moment. By building theory through the use of inductive methods, this study obtained and integrated rich descriptive information and uncovered unanticipated clues.

**Setting and Overview of the Research Design**

The research site was a business college at a Midwestern state university. Because the study aimed to gain insight into how the present moment impacts teacher effectiveness and student learning, it employed both qualitative and quantitative methods.

**Sample**

Students at a business college at a Midwestern state university were asked to participate. Thirteen graduate students from an organizational behavior class answered Survey One and 182 students (76 graduate and 106 undergraduate) from 6 different organizational behavior and leadership classes completed the Present Moment Survey (see Research Instruments below for descriptions). Because of the offer to share aggregate data with people involved and the need to lessen potential student fears about the instructor's ability to identify individual student responses, and because this was a preliminary study, no demographic data beyond course was requested.

**Qualitative Analysis: Uncovering the Principles**

Ongoing conversations regarding effective teaching led to this project. A colleague had seen me in the classroom and witnessed the excitement and energy that was generated between myself and the students. Her observations and our subsequent discussions led to my taking extensive notes regarding what I was beginning to understand as the present moment and its impact on teacher effectiveness and student learning.

As the conversation progressed, we considered the questions between the teacher and students that Strauss and Corbin (1998) suggested: With whom is an interaction or exchange occurring and why? Who begins or is expected to begin this interaction or exchange? What are the consequences of engaging in this process? What can these discussions tell us about the purpose or function being served? For example, we realized that by getting present the teacher creates a learning experience for the students that would not have happened otherwise.

After several discussions about the intent and consequences of the present moment, we inductively categorized our ideas into three principles: Get Present, Make Contact, and Challenge Participation. We chose these labels because of their simplicity, their accurate depiction of the intent behind the actions, and the fact that the literature did not offer an acceptable taxonomy. A fourth category, Desired Outcome, came after we realized that in order to measure the impact of these principles a dependent variable was necessary.
Next, we focused on identifying the process through which the principles were combined, paying particular attention to when and why the principles focused on teaching and learning. Following Strauss and Corbin (1998), we looked for sequences of interactions between the teacher and students and then sought to understand how these sequences varied in response to changing classroom conditions. We asked ourselves questions Strauss and Corbin recommended, including: What conditions are at play when these principles are operative and teaching and learning are most effective? What conditions or activities connect one principle to another? How do the consequences of one principle play into another principle? For example, through our discussion we realized that these principles can occur both sequentially and simultaneously.

We each formed a list of what we thought these principles meant both in theory and practice. We independently reviewed our lists to search for any new events, behaviors, or indicators that might explain these principles. We met again to discuss new ideas, identify redundancy, and agree on items. For example, we recognized the similarity between “am excited by this class” and “am excited to return to this class.” The later phrase was eliminated.

In cases when it was noted that items did not reflect the intention of our study, i.e., focus on the present moment in the classroom, they were rewritten. For example, the item “I liked to question the things I am learning” became “In this classroom I like to question the things I am learning”.

Use of Previous Studies

Simultaneous to these discussions, I scoured the literature looking for any relevant surveys. Items were adapted for Get Present (Baer et al, 2004; Kiropoulos et al., 2006; Krech, 2006), Make Contact (Crick, et al., 2008; Dixson, 2010; Johnson, 2009; Jones et al., 2008; Richmond et al., 2003), Challenge Participation (Crick, 2008; Jones et al., 2008; Langer, 2004; Wilson et al., 2007-2008), and Desired Outcome (Dixson, 2010; Frick et al., 2009; Jones et al., 2008; Kember et al., 2009). These items were added to the items that emerged from the qualitative process outlined above.

By the time we finished these activities, the list included 99 items; it was then given to a graduate-level organization behavior class whose members were asked to indicate the appropriate theme for each item. Given that there were 13 students in the class, when it came to analyzing the data, the breakeven point seemed to be 6. Hence, any item that was chosen by at least 6 students was considered good.

A few items required further discussion and reflection. For example, one item, “In this class I am alert”, received from the graduate students high scores for two different themes, causing us to realize that the item did not sufficiently differentiate. It was eliminated.

A final survey of 29 items, Present Moment Survey, was designed and administered to 182 students. It contained the following 11 themes: Aware of Sensations, Alert to the Environment, Attentive to this Moment, Appreciate People, Create Trust, Use Motivational Techniques, Ask Unexpected Questions, Embrace Resistance, Be Positive, Increase Student Learning and Increase Teacher Effectiveness.

Research Instruments

Survey One

This is a 99-item questionnaire which measured the respondents’ perceptions of which theme is appropriate for each item. The respondents were asked to “Please indicate in the space at the right of each item the appropriate category in which you think it belongs”.
Present Moment Survey

The Present Moment Survey is a 29-item self-report survey which measured a student’s perception of his/her ability to use the themes. Using a 5-point Likert scale – with 1 equaling Never and 5 equaling Very Often – the respondents were asked to “Please indicate in the space at the right of each item the degree to which you believe the statement applies to you.”

RESULTS

Consistent with standard protocol for scale development (DeVellis, 1991; Gorsuch, 1983; Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994), we began with 99-item Survey One which was gleaned from an examination of research and pedagogical literature with a degree of redundancy included (DeVellis, 1991), as well as from the qualitative analysis discussed previously. In addition, all initial items were carefully examined for face validity by the author and the graduate student who was assisting.

Consistent with standard factor analytic procedures useful for data reduction and scale development (Gorsuch, 1983; McCroskey & Young, 1979; Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994; Park, Dailey, & Lemus, 2002), the 29-item Present Moment Survey results were submitted to a series of exploratory factor analyses (Gorsuch, 1983; McCroskey & Young, 1979; Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994). Exploratory factor analysis (EFA) is appropriate when the purpose of the research is to examine the structure of a given domain (i.e., get present, make contact, and challenge participation) as represented by a sample of variables, in this case, the 11 themes mentioned above (Gorsuch, 1983). It also identifies the basic conceptual dimensions that represent the greatest proportion of the variance in the construct of interest (Gorsuch, 1983). Given no a priori dimensions or factor structures with which to test a hypothesized factor solution, EFA was deemed most appropriate for scale construction (Park et al., 2002).

The validation process for the Present Moment Survey instrument includes three steps: content validity, reliability, and construct validity. Content validity is ensured through an extensive review of literature and empirical studies. Existing scales were adapted (see Use of Previous Studies above). Where there seemed to be an omission (i.e. “I notice that my thoughts and outside worries dissipate in this class”) new scales were developed.

Reliability is measured through the internal consistency method with Cronbach’s alpha as the reliability indicator. Cronbach’s alpha for Get Present is .71; for Make Contact, .74; for Challenge Participation, .59; and for Desired Outcome, .87. Three of the four Cronbach alpha scores exceeded 0.7, indicating good internal consistency (Nunnally, 1978).

A principal components analysis was run on the 29 items. A final model resulted with a total of 18 of the 29 items (Table 1). See Table 2 for descriptive statistics and correlations.

Table 1. Exploratory Factor Analysis Loadings for the Present Moment Scale (N=182)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Items</th>
<th>Factor loading</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>GET PRESENT (GTP)</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>• Aware of Sensations (ASN)</td>
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<tr>
<td>1. I pay attention to whether my muscles are tense or relaxed in this class.</td>
<td>0.77</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. I often feel my heart beating in this class.</td>
<td>0.76</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. I pay attention to bodily sensations, such as the classroom temperature in this class.</td>
<td>0.62</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Attentive to the Moment (ATM)</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. I notice visual elements in the classroom, such as colors, shapes, textures, or patterns of light and shadow in this class.</td>
<td>0.63</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
5. I am alert to the world around me in this class. 0.51

MAKE CONTACT (MCT)
- Connect with Self (CNS)
  6. I am focused in this class. 0.55
  7. I am energetic in this class. 0.71
  8. I like to try out learning in different ways in this class. 0.52
- Connect with Others (CNO)
  9. I am getting to know other students in this class. 0.77
  10. The students in this class share stories and experiences with one another. 0.77

CHALLENGE PARTICIPATION (CHP)
- Respect Each Other (REO)
  11. This instructor asks questions or encourages students to talk in class. 0.49
  12. This instructor maintains a positive perspective in this class. 0.57
- Challenge Each Other (CEO)
  13. I like to question the things I am learning in this class. 0.47
  14. This instructor asks questions that catch me off guard in this class. 0.62

DESIRED OUTCOME (DOT)
- Student Learning (STL)
  15. I have opportunities to practice or try out what I am learning in this class. 0.66
  16. In this class I immediately apply the relevant course concepts to my life. 0.77
- Teaching Effectiveness (TEF)
  17. This instructor finds ways to make the course interesting to me. 0.77
  18. This instructor makes the class material engaging. 0.73

Note: Responses were solicited using a five-point Likert scale that ranged from (1) Never to (5) Very Often

Table 2. Mean, standard deviations, and correlations.

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<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Mean (SD)</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
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<th>7</th>
<th>8</th>
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<th>10</th>
<th>11</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. GTPTOT*</td>
<td>14.74 (3.67)</td>
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<td>2. ASNTOT</td>
<td>8.08 (2.71)</td>
<td>.92&quot;</td>
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<td>3. ATMTOT</td>
<td>6.65 (1.57)</td>
<td>.74&quot;</td>
<td>.42&quot;</td>
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<td>4. MCTTOT</td>
<td>18.86 (3.01)</td>
<td>.28&quot;</td>
<td>.17&quot;</td>
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<td>5. CNSTOT</td>
<td>10.92 (2.11)</td>
<td>.31&quot;</td>
<td>.19&quot;</td>
<td>.37&quot;</td>
<td>.88&quot;</td>
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<tr>
<td>6. CNOTOT</td>
<td>7.95 (1.53)</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>.17&quot;</td>
<td>.76&quot;</td>
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<td>7. CHPTOT</td>
<td>15.51 (2.00)</td>
<td>.19&quot;</td>
<td>.13</td>
<td>.24&quot;</td>
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<td>8. REOTOT</td>
<td>8.77 (1.24)</td>
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<td>9. CEOTOT</td>
<td>6.71 (1.49)</td>
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<td>.28&quot;</td>
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<td>.45&quot;</td>
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<td>.10</td>
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<tr>
<td>10. DOTTOT</td>
<td>15.46 (3.00)</td>
<td>.26&quot;</td>
<td>.16&quot;</td>
<td>.34&quot;</td>
<td>.67&quot;</td>
<td>.63&quot;</td>
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<tr>
<td>11. TEFTOT</td>
<td>8.00 (1.69)</td>
<td>.19&quot;</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>.29&quot;</td>
<td>.61&quot;</td>
<td>.60&quot;</td>
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<td>.46&quot;</td>
<td>.35&quot;</td>
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** Correlation is significant at the .05 level.
* Correlation is significant at the .01 level.
DISCUSSION

There were a few key findings associated with this study. First, the results suggest that applying the three principles of Get Present, Make Contact, and Challenge Participation will enhance teacher effectiveness and student learning. Each of the three propositions (i.e., when the teacher is present with himself and his students, his teaching effectiveness and the students' learning improves; when the teacher makes contact with herself and her students, her teaching effectiveness and the students' learning improves; and when the teacher challenges participation with himself and his students, his teaching effectiveness and the students' learning improves) are positively correlated to Desired Outcome and its two themes of Student Learning and Teaching Effectiveness (see Table 2).

Next, Cronbach’s alpha had scales from .59 to .87, which showed good internal consistency. Although one scale had a Cronbach’s alpha of less than the recommended 0.7, because this study is exploratory in nature, this scale remained.

Finally, the study results allowed the Present Moment Survey to be further fine-tuned; streamlining it from 11 to 8 themes and from 29 to 18 items makes the ongoing research process much less daunting.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the ability to be present in the classroom, coupled with passion for teaching, will increase the effectiveness of your teaching and your students’ learning. Using the principles of Get Present, Make Contact, and Challenge Participation with your students will better engage them in the process of learning. Maintaining the presence of the moment through the three principles and your individual teaching style will keep the students’ attention and enhance their learning process through identity. This is the connection between what the student already knows with what is being taught; this is the process of education.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

It is important to note that random selection and assignment were not used in this study. “The randomization process was beyond the researcher’s control, as is customarily the case in educational settings, since the participants belong to an 'intact group' and are administratively defined” (Gall et al., 1996, p. 17). Another limitation is the self-reporting nature of the measurement instrument, “which hinders the ability to control errors and bias in the participants’ responses” (Gall et al., 1996, p. 17).

Future studies would do well to gather hard evidence to support the notion of the present moment as an effective teaching and learning tool. Additional quantitative instruments should be designed and used which will facilitate testing the pre- and post- effects of the present moment within the classroom. Additionally, other studies should be encouraged. This paper
lays out the concepts; now further studies should be conducted to address the question: what makes a classroom a place where students want to learn and teachers want to teach?

REFERENCES


