

9-1-2011

# Talking Back: Real Presence: Challenges and Opportunities for a Wired Generation: Can Medicated Conversation Lead to Meaningful Dialogue?

Jeanine Warisse Turner

Follow this and additional works at: <http://epublications.marquette.edu/conversations>

---

### Recommended Citation

Warisse Turner, Jeanine (2012) "Talking Back: Real Presence: Challenges and Opportunities for a Wired Generation: Can Medicated Conversation Lead to Meaningful Dialogue?," *Conversations on Jesuit Higher Education*: Vol. 41, Article 35.  
Available at: <http://epublications.marquette.edu/conversations/vol41/iss1/35>

# TALKING BACK

## Real Presence: Challenges and Opportunities for a Wired Generation

Can mediated conversation lead to meaningful dialogue?

By Jeanine Warisse Turner

Students trickle in to a large lecture class at a University. They sit down, pull out their phones and begin texting. The professor arrives and some try to hide their phones while others sit them on their desk. Time between classes used to be an opportunity for conversation in the classroom, it now provides the opportunity for conversation outside the classroom. While physically together and proximately close, where and with whom are these students most present?

Communication used to primarily require primarily physical presence. Letter writing and later telephones allowed communication to take place over distance, but the primary way we

conceived of presence was through physical presence. The “best” way to communicate was face-to-face. As new media applications like social networking, texting, and video chat provide more options for connections, the concept of face-to-face communication as the ideal communication is changing. Now physical presence seems much less relevant, or even desired.

Father Nicolás touches on this when he spoke of the “globalization of superficiality” suggesting that immediate access to information and audiences can create superficial relationships (*Conversations* 40, 2011). Father Stephen Kuder also underlines the debilitating effect that mediated communication can have on relationships (*Conversations* 31, 2007). Professor

Harrison responds to these concerns about superficiality and disconnect by embracing the opportunities offered by a mediated world, asking the question, “To what extent should the Jesuit education system be re-designed to avoid the pitfalls of superficiality and take advantage of the benefits that exist for engagement in the modern technological world?” (*Conversations* 20, 2011)

To think through this question, I have reflected on what presence means and how prayer can help us understand mediated interaction. I am an associate

---

*Jeanine Warisse Turner is an associate professor teaching communication, culture, and technology at Georgetown University.*

## Talking Back



Students at Santa Clara University.

professor at Georgetown University and I study presence and research uses of communication technology. In August of 2010, I participated in an Ignatian 19th Annotation Retreat. Over the subsequent 10 months, I prayed daily for thirty minutes, met weekly with a spiritual advisor, and met monthly with a group of individuals experiencing the retreat with me. The biggest anxiety I had leading up to the retreat was where I was going to find 30 minutes in my day and what I was going to do with that 30 minutes. Over those ten months of Ignatian prayer, I gained a deeper understanding about what communication and presence means, both in my relationship with God and others.

**What is presence?** Prior to the arrival of many of today's communication technologies, presence from a communication perspective meant being in the same room with another person, open to interaction with that person. The term hardly needed to be defined because it was so obvious. Now we define presence as an experience of feeling like the other person is there, in the same space, even if she is not. However, this type of perceived presence is not the same as communicating in person.

Perceived presence requires a different type of effort on the part of the communicators involved. Communicators fill in what is physically absent. In some

cases this can help communication. For example, many parents have suggested that they have a better conversation with their teenagers over text messages than they do when they share a dinner. Maybe in this case, each communicator is given the freedom to imagine the communication partner the way they would like that person to be. Each person can envision an accepting and loving communicator. The teenager isn't rolling her eyes, and the parent isn't shaking his head disapprovingly. This imagined audience can help the relationship because it allows some communication to take place that normally might not.

However, over time, when communicators are *only* interacting in mediated space, the lack of visual cues can lead to misunderstandings on the part of both communicators taking a toll on the relationship. Individuals who know each other via distance technologies may overemphasize characteristics held in common and ignore differences, making it harder or more awkward to establish or maintain a relationship. Without real time, in-person feedback, our communication can revert to rote, disconnected, and compartmentalized communication. We don't share the same physical space *or* time. We are often *asynchronous* (*not at the same time*), meaning we send a message but do not get immediate feedback like in a real-time conversation. The message comes later. As a result, we juggle messages like balls. We ask for a report. We comment on a discussion thread. Conversations become a flurry of messages crossing in cyber-

space. We can send out thirty messages related to work or home, involving funny, sad, encouraging, and disappointed content within a span of 20 minutes. Throughout, without in-person cues, we can always imagine the recipient the way we want to, which gives us more agency as speakers. We can engage in multiple conversations at once and be judicious about what we reveal and when. We convince ourselves that we are attentive and present—enough—but are we really?

**So what does this have to do with prayer life?** Prayer is the ultimate example of a mediated experience with another. Prayer is a medium for communicating with God. Interestingly, this type of communication with God can have many similarities to our mediated communication today. We pray when we need something or when we are sad and need support. We pray when someone's friends are sick and we want them to get better. We pray when it is Sunday and we think we are supposed to pray. We send asynchronous messages in short bursts, instigated by our needs.

**T**he decoupling of message and physical presence influences our perception of our audience. We no longer receive physical cues requiring immediate attention; we are not in listening mode but constant send mode. Listening mode is very different. Listening requires the suspension of our

perspective and concentration on another's so that we can find understanding. Active listening means that we understand the message and needs of our audience on their time rather than ours. It requires attention, focus, and patience. Just like prayer.

Listening to God requires waiting for an answer in God's time rather than ours. Listening in prayer requires attention, focus, and patience. In the Spiritual Exercises, St. Ignatius invites us to imagine our Divine audience by thinking about the sounds, sights, smells, and textures surrounding the Gospel stories. This imagination helps an individual create a concrete physical context for a relationship with Jesus. Just like a face-to-face meeting provides nonverbal cues from communicators that inhibit both individuals from an idealized relationship, the application of the senses attempts to bring a person in prayer to a more reflective setting that inhibits an ability to assume a more idealistic perception of God.

I learned that this imaginative prayer requires concentration and effort. It requires putting oneself in another place in time to improve my dialogue with God. Whether an individual uses this Ignatian approach to spirituality, or another type of prayer, a relationship primarily developed outside of physical presence (just like any relationship) takes time, attention, and patience. Without this time, attention, and patience, prayer can become rote, disconnected, and compartmentalized.

**Presence can be difficult.** My difficulty in concentrating for thirty minutes a day gradually became easier. I felt more present with God. Sometimes I felt that presence in the thirty minutes of prayer and sometimes I felt it hours later. I found that my communication with God is often asynchronous and that I have to be focused on my audience so that I can be aware of God's reply when it comes. Presence is not about me demanding

God's attention or my daughter's attention or my husband's attention. Presence in prayer and in all communication is created by the communicators involved but requires a focus on the audience, their needs, and their response. The ease of anytime/anywhere communication can make us think that *sending* a message is the same as *communicating* a message. My year of reflection taught me the important roles of waiting and listening.

Mediated communication can provide the context for meaningful dialogue, but may require even more focus on audience and dialogue than when

## Conversations become a flurry of messages crossing in cyberspace.

we share physical space. Maybe our attention to our prayer life over the years has been a precursor to the effort involved in making relationships work with the advent of technology that allows separation of people, messages, and space. And just as our inability to sustain strong spiritual lives can coincide with a one-sided, compartmentalized, and efficient approach to our prayer lives, using this same approach in our communication with others, whether in person or across distance, can create the same superficial relationships.

Presence takes time—but we often take it for granted. Checking email while talking to my son diminishes my presence with him. Not taking the time daily to reflect on my relationship with God diminishes my presence with God. The retreat taught me about audience and presence. Maybe remembering our audience will help us understand engagement, in the room and across the globe. ■