

# *Hakomi on Campus: Teaching Loving Presence and Mindfulness at a Public University in Mexico City*

**Fernando Ortiz**

**Editor's Note:** Hakomi trainings emphasize the principles upon which its methods and techniques are built. The unity principle always points towards the interconnectedness of all life and the necessity of working on many different levels and in interdisciplinary ways. However, the bulk of the training (unless students choose to sign up for extended times) necessarily focuses on the applications to individual, couples, and family therapy, while simply naming other possibilities. So, it is always wonderful to hear reports of how students have taking the work back to neonatal wards, jails, senior centers, law mediation situations, schools, and more. In this issue we welcome the creative report of Professor Fernando Ortiz, and how he made applications to teaching low-income students Hakomi methods in the Division of Social Sciences and Humanities in a large Mexican University.

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**ABSTRACT:** This paper describes the teaching of Loving Presence as a state of mind to students at a public university in Mexico City, the majority of which come from lower income homes. Most of them have no intention of becoming psychotherapists, but, to get their bachelors degree in Social Psychology, they must do research and lead workshops dealing with various social problems, such as delinquency, violence towards women and children and attitudes toward people with AIDS. The article describes how experientially learning some of the principles of Hakomi has allowed them to work through their experiences, and nurture themselves and their research subjects.

During the last 6 years I have taught some fundamentals of Hakomi to Social Psychology students in their last year at Universidad Autonoma Metropolitana –Iztapalapa (UAMI), a public University in Mexico City. The principles and techniques come mainly from the Loving Presence and Quietening the Mind Workshops, as led by Ron Kurtz and Donna Martin during my training in Mexico (1999-2003). This is not to say I did therapy or trained the students in therapeutic skills. I can not even claim that I facilitated Hakomi workshops at UAMI. It was more like incorporating some exercises, fostering a few minutes of mindfulness and speaking about empathy and loving presence.

The setting was usually a regular classroom (no cushions or rugs), and the attendants were students coming from lower income families, (instead of growth oriented, upper and middle class people who had already gone through at least two training programs in psychotherapy, as was the case with my fellow trainees in Mexico). But then again, the principles may guide any type of work with most types of people, and the techniques are valuable far beyond the realm of psychotherapy. I think I might have been doing my own “Hakomi in the Trenches” (Johanson, 1986).

This university has 45 000 students in 4 unidades (units or *campi*). Their families have an average yearly income of

5000 pesos, or about \$ 450 dollars. Iztapalapa receives many students that come from lower income families living<sup>1</sup> in the eastern, poorer parts of the city and neighboring *municipios* (counties) in the *Estado de Mexico*, so more than 60 % of them do not have, or barely have, sufficient social and economic conditions in order to study.

The *Licenciatura en Psicología Social*, (Bachelor's Degree in Social Psychology) one in about 12 programs offering a Bachelors degree in the Division of Social Sciences and Humanities, has about 500 students. In their first three years, they take courses on social psychology theory and methodology. In this stage most of them have no intention of becoming therapists, though many have that in mind when they enter the University (Aguilar, 2005). In fact, many of their teachers warn them against learning anything that sounds like individual or clinical psychology, which is, to some of the professors' belief, opposed to Social Psychology as they conceive it.

As part of their thesis, they must do research on topics such as the terminally ill, single mothers, fostering reading abilities, prevention of sexually transmitted diseases, violence, etc. This entails interviewing and/or applying questionnaires or surveys to their subjects. They must also make an *intervention* that is often a brief workshop. Additionally, they have to do “social service,” meaning

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working without wages in an authorized agency. Sometimes they can manage to do their social service and their research in the same place. During the gathering of data for their projects in leading the workshop, and as they work on their social service, they have to deal with their own as well as their subjects' feelings. Perhaps some good intentioned teacher might offer some advice regarding what to do when you have a real person speaking about real problems, flooded with emotion, but the official curriculum does not prepare them for that.

My teaching usually includes a trimester long introduction to attachment theory and two trimesters of group process during which I include the principles and some of the techniques of Hakomi.

When I studied psychology, back in the 70's, my teachers advised me to be emphatic when interviewing people. Only, nobody told us *how* to be emphatic. Was it something you had, or something you could learn? And if it was more a skill to be learned than a gift, how could anyone learn *that*? How could one "identify with and understand another's situation"<sup>2</sup>? And if one could be empathic, what then?

Many years latter, the Loving Presence workshop gave me a practical answer to my question. Throughout the training, we learned and practiced the ability to be in the present, focused on what is happening in the moment on both our own experience and the experiences of the other, *and* finding pleasure in being with the other (Kurtz, 2007).

In order to foster the Loving Presence state of mind, I usually proposed the following exercises:

*The Awareness Continuum Exercise*, described by Stevens (1971) which invites participants to observe their awareness and notice where it goes.

*The Being With exercise*, in which participants sit in pairs, facing each other. Their task is to look at their partners and mindfully study whatever happens to them as they look and are looked at, closing their eyes as soon as anything outside the present moment, non verbal interaction comes to their minds.

*The priming the Pump and Search for Non-egocentric Nourishment exercises*, consisting in remembering a peak experience and sharing it, either in pairs or in small groups. The idea is to go beyond Rogers' unconditional regard "insofar as loving presence invites us to notice and appreciate specific qualities in our clients, and to allow those qualities to nourish us as we work" (Cole and Ladas-Gaskin, 2007). The qualities that nourish us may be as obvious as our consultants' smile or eloquence or traits such as their courage authenticity or perseverance.

*Someone speaking about significant material while his/her partner stays in Loving Presence.*

In our case, significant material usually refers to the following topics:

*Working through the process of saying goodbye to their student years and preparing for the often frustrating task of looking for a job.*

In Mexico, as in many other countries, being a student means having more status and tranquility than having a Bachelors degree and being unemployed. Many of them are pioneers. They are the first in their families to receive higher education, which may mean both great expectations and a lot of pressure. Although Mexico has gone through decades of underemployment, most people still have the belief that a college degree is a lifelong passport to the middle class. The truth is that, after months of knocking on doors and sending CV's, perhaps 50 or 60% of our graduates manage to get rather low paying jobs that are somewhat related to their studies. The loving presence exercises help to create a trusting environment in which to share their doubts and fears, as well as accepting the mixed feelings associated with leaving school.

*Managing the stress of doing research and writing their thesis.*

The students are required to do a small piece of research and write a thesis during their last year. This means not only going through the literature, applying questionnaires and interviews, and doing statistics, but also coping with the authorities of the chosen institution in order to get access to their subjects, plus writing in readable Spanish. The practice of mindfulness and some of the quieting the mind exercises helps them cope with those tasks, which they may share with their schoolmates in our sessions.

*Coping with both their own and their subject's emotions.*

Fostering a Loving Presence state of mind, and being able to stay with their subjects helps them get their data, as well as pay something back through empathic listening, and face the real world as they do research with vulnerable populations. Their task goes, in part, against one of the first rules that I learned during my training in Hakomi: Don't ask questions! Yet they must ask their research subjects both demographic and specific questions regarding their investigation. Nevertheless my proposal is that they can get the data *and* regard their subjects as unique, valuable human beings, not merely sources of information. The *quid* of the situation is, how can one get the facts *and* give something in return, mainly an hour or so of being attended to by someone who does not judge or interrupt, tries to stay attuned, and is willing to suspend the survey if strong emotions come forward.

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Two months ago, I e-mailed some of my former students, asking them what if they remembered and had practiced Loving Presence. There was no method in my asking, as I have no complete list of their addresses. Two of my respondents were currently working with their thesis:

*Rita* was working with people suffering from rheumatoid arthritis:

I feel that I have employed (loving presence) in my surveys, because sometimes I get patients that are very sick and that is why I am not progressing much, because I spend more than an hour with them when they start telling me what they are going through. Automatically I can put myself in their place, listen to them and they feel that presence without anybody telling them anything, simply listening to them

*Silvia* interviewed women who had been abused by their partners:

When you spoke about loving presence, I must confess I felt, like rescued, because I am working with something that is not easy to deal with, and when I started my research I knew that what we were learning would be very useful. Although we are not therapists, we can give that person the opportunity of being listened to without making faces, or interrupting them, or making any comments, or judgments because sometimes we make the mistake of trying to give advice when the only thing the person wants is someone who listens, and that we can give.

The best way is to focus completely on that person, no matter if it is 5 minutes or 2 hours, the important thing is that the persons can see we are with them, interested in what they are saying and, if possible, be empathic and show them that we are listening and understanding.

As you know, the issue I was working with was not easy. In gathering my data I interviewed a girl who felt pain regarding what had happened with her husband, but was also very anxious about the mental health of her son, so I felt that the interview was getting out of control, but I realized she had to let that out so she could speak about violence in her marriage,

so I listened and stayed with her. When I saw that she was feeling better I resumed the questioning and at the end of the interview she seemed fine.

*Sara*, who got her degree 4 years ago and does research on addiction, wrote:

Loving Presence refers to the fact that to be able to have a good relationship and interaction with others there must be “love,” but not sexual love. It’s more like unconditional love. Of course I have applied it in my jobs, when I work with people especially, and I try to practice it with the people who are close to me. Of course, I am sure I need to know it (The Hakomi Method) much better.

As I read this last testimonial, I remembered I was sort of shy in introducing some of the exercises in my courses. I thought, or at least a part of me thought, I had to dedicate most of the sessions to teaching theory and supervising the student’s progress in their thesis, on telling them what do should a specific problem came up. And then there is the danger that some of the students might try to “do therapy” without any formal training, not to mention my colleagues’ probable criticism: “Ortiz is teaching clinical stuff to the students”. As I write this paper, I am changing my mind. Next time I’ll dedicate a few more sessions to the Method.

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<sup>1</sup> More than 60% of Iztapalapa's students either have no computers or outdated models. The majority has no internet at home and can't afford textbooks, so it is common practice to photocopy them (De Garay, 2004).

<sup>2</sup> Retrieved from (<http://education.yahoo.com/reference/dictionary/entry/empathy>), July 20, 2008..