



Javier Girarte Guillén

Far Beyond the Virtual Classroom:



The Power of Home Visitation

“The King will reply, “Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me”” (Matthew 25:40, NIV).¹

During my employment as a summer online instructor at UM Virtual at the University of Montemorelos in Mexico, I have worked with students from a variety of countries who enroll in online courses. These are usually employed full-time students, and most of them are married with children. Because of their life and work experiences, many of these students never had the opportunity to earn a degree. Other students, already professionals, want to train for a second career or earn additional credentials or degrees to further their career.

I also teach in a traditional classroom at a large Adventist secondary school, Instituto Soledad Acevedo de Los Reyes (also in Montemorelos, Mexico), where we are encouraged to do home visitations. Visiting students in their own home environments is a good way to get to know them and to build a good relationship with the family, especially at the beginning of the school year. I must confess I haven't conducted these visits as often as I could have; I'd rather invite students over for vespers on Friday or Saturday night; but indeed, the times I've visited students in their homes, the experience has been meaningful.

However, in my work as an online instructor at the college and university level, visiting students at home would be quite complicated, even impossible, since the online courses that UM Virtual enrolls students from around the world. But given the ben-

efits of this practice, I wondered if it would be possible to do something similar with online students.

During the summer of 2018, I had the opportunity to do so. During one of the video class sessions I was conducting with a few students, I asked them about the places they were currently living. Four lived in the United States (California and Washington), one in Peru, others in Columbia, Mexico, and so on. I even had a student who lived in Germany. But when I heard a student say that she lived in Montemorelos, the same city where I live, I was greatly surprised. Not only that, she lived in the same neighborhood as I did! Finally, I had the chance to visit an online student, not virtually, but in person. What follows are a few tips from my experience conducting a home visitation with my online student; however, many of these are also good practice for general face-to-face classrooms, as well:

Tip No. 1: When conducting home visits, make sure other members of the family (or other people) will be in the home at the time of the visit.

This tip may seem obvious, but it is crucial that other people are present during the visit. This protects both the teacher and student from allegations of misconduct. Also, the student may feel more confident when family members are present. And most importantly, when family members participate in home visits, they engage in the education of the student.

After chatting awhile online, my

student and I arranged a time for me to visit her home the following week. I asked her if there would others in her home, and she said that her family was going to be there. I learned that she lived with her family in a large single-room house in which the living spaces were divided by curtains.

Tip No. 2: Learn as much as you can about the student and his or her family.

I really didn't know much about this student. What I learned from chatting with her was that she could not take regular classes because she suffered from osteoarthritis, a severe form of degenerative arthritis. I decided to research more information about this disease prior to our scheduled visit and found that “it's the most common type of arthritis. When the cartilage—the slick, cushioning surface on the ends of bones—wears away, bone rubs against bone, causing pain, swelling and stiffness. Over time, joints can lose strength and pain may become chronic.”² She couldn't move, so her life was spent in a wheelchair, where she was constantly assisted by her family, especially her sister.

Tip No. 3: Learn about what the student likes and try to please him or her.

I also learned that this student was fond of figs; so, since I have a fig tree in my back yard, and the fruit was already ripe, I grabbed a bunch of the best figs, and put them in a bag. I found some red ribbon and used it to tie a nice bow on the bag, and then headed to my student's house. It took

More Reading on Home Visits

me only a few minutes to get there. How many times had I walked by this house? If I only had known a student lived there, I would have visited more often.

When I arrived at the home, she was already waiting for me. I greeted her with a big smile, and then gave her the bag of figs. She couldn't hide her happiness to see the bag full of delicious sweet purple figs. She thanked me for the fruit and smiled shyly.

Tip No. 4: Ask first before shaking hands.

As is customary in Mexican culture, I shook her hand firmly but politely and softly—at least that is what I thought. I was wrong! My student immediately cried out in pain. I felt so embarrassed; I didn't know what to do. She explained that due to her osteoarthritis, when her bones rub against one another, it causes severe pain. I apologized over and over! It is important to know how best to greet the student when entering the home. What may be appropriate in one setting might be inappropriate in another.

After that embarrassing and painful introduction, we sat together in the living room. We talked about her life and how difficult it was for her to perform the most basic daily tasks. Although discussing her challenges brought her to tears at one point in our conversation, she never stopped smiling and spoke positively about her life.

Tip No. 5: Be emphatic with your students; you do not know what is really happening in their working lives and family.

We enjoyed a short, pleasant visit. A few days later, she posted in our online class forum that for her, my home visit was one of the best experiences in the class. She said she had had a wonderful time, even though the pain in her bones never ceased during the visit. I replied that I was sorry for having caused her discom-

fort, to which she replied that the pain wasn't caused by my well-meaning handshake, it was just pain she lived with every day.

Her bravery inspired me. She rarely complained. During the visit to her home, I realized that she was really very sick. She barely moved her body; and her hands, which were on her lap all the time, seemed very weak. I noticed, however, that her mind was sharp, and she expressed firm determination to earn her de-

gree. Despite her condition, she was trying hard to reach her goals, and my class was not the only one she was taking at the time. She told me that sometimes she wanted to quit. Her disease and pain didn't allow her to do the homework, and sometimes she was so tired she couldn't even read or dictate to her sister so she could type for her.

Occasionally, she had to be in the

Education by Ellen G. White: <https://m.egwwritings.org/en/book/29/toc>. The book *Education* speaks to the value of home visits where parents and teachers work together and the power of home visits in Chapter 33 titled "Co-operation."—Ellen G. White, *Education* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press, 1903), 283-286.

Project Appleseed: <https://www.projectappleseed.org/teacher-home-visits>. A summary of a study that tracked 14 schools over three years and the impact of their home-visitation initiatives. Researchers' findings included increased student performance, parent involvement, and generally positive attitudes toward school as well as reduced discipline problems.

Edutopia: "Home Visits 101" (January 19, 2017): <https://www.edutopia.org/article/home-visits-101-cristina-santamaria-graff>. Cristina Santamaria Graff shares that home visits can help improve parent involvement in students' school lives. Several tips are shared for coordinating an effective home visitation program.

Home Visits: Tips and Resources for Making Safe and Effective Home Visits: <https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/video/attachments/home-visitor-safe-home-visits.pdf>. A comprehensive list of tips and resources compiled by the Vanderbilt Kennedy Center for Excellence at Vanderbilt University, Nashville, Tennessee. Includes suggestions for establishing rapport, setting boundaries during visits, and safety before, during, and after visits.

Home Visiting—Resources: <https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/browse/keyword/home-visiting>. Prepared and maintained by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, this resource provides several articles on coordinating home visits for kindergarten and early elementary school.

7 Tips for Successful Home Visits: <https://midtesol.org/7-tips-for-successful-home-visits/>. MIDTESOL is the Mid-America Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages. The authors note that home visits, while challenging due to changing schedules of both parents and teachers, can reap positive outcomes such as opening lines of communication between home and school.

hospital for several days, which made it impossible for her to work on course projects. She was worried about not being able to submit all the work on time. I told her that since this was an open course, she could take the time she needed in order to complete the assignments. She was happy to hear that, and I was glad to be able to offer that solution. This approach was not unique to me. Other teachers at UM Virtual were aware about the condition of this student and willingly made similar arrangements to give her extra time to complete her activities. These arrangements were supported by the school's Calificación Diferida, (Deferred Grade) policy, which means any student can ask for extra time to complete the course if needed.

During my hour-long visit, we talked about her plans for the future, her family, and the reasons she had decided to pursue a career as an accountant. She spoke openly, and I noticed she felt free to do so. We had a great talk, after which I thanked her and her family for the warm welcome and left.

Final Reflection

Once outside the house, I experienced mixed feelings. On one hand, I had planned the visit to provide encouragement to a student, but on the contrary, it was I who received encouragement! No wonder the Bible says, "You will be blessed when you come in and blessed when you go out" (Deuteronomy 28:6).

It's been two years since that visit. Since then, my student has faced many other difficulties: In the past 16 months, her older brother and her mom have passed away, and her disease progressed to the point that she had to quit school. Will she be able to finish her career? I don't know; however, I believe she *can* because she has the courage to do so.

As a teacher and tutor, home visitations have provided me with a tremendous opportunity to learn more about my students and their

families, their challenges, goals, and will to succeed. Over the past several years, I have had several experiences with home visits. One series of home visits was to the home of a student who could not attend school regularly because of a bone cancer diagnosis and subsequent treatments. Regular home visits allowed him to keep up and eventually successfully take his exams. Another series of visits was to a student who returned home after several weeks in the hospital and felt disconnected from school. Both of these students and their families appreciated the opportunity to stay connected with the school, not only in terms of keeping up with assignments, but knowing that they were part of a school community that missed them.

One memorable visit took place during the Christmas holiday, since no other day could be scheduled with the family. I will never forget the student's response. She said with awe: "I can't believe Mr. Girarte is in my house having dinner on Christmas!" This memory remains with me because the best experience I've ever had with home visits was when my own 3rd-grade teacher visited me! It was long time ago, but I still vividly recall the experience.

These visits have taught me how to best help my students reach some of their goals and have created memories that both I and my students will remember long after the courses are over. Education philosopher Paulo Freire stated: "Educators need to know what happens in the world of the children with whom they work. They need to know the universe of their dreams, the language with which they skillfully defend themselves from the aggressiveness of their world, what they know independently of the school, and how they know it."³ Home visits are one way for teachers to engage with their students, and their students' families,

outside of the formal, sometimes intimidating, confines of the classroom. Home visits have the potential to help teachers "strengthen the ties that bind them to their pupils," and in doing so, help them "learn how to deal more successfully with their different dispositions and temperaments,"⁴ and meet their needs. ✍

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Recommended citation:

Javier Girarte Guillén, "Far Beyond the Virtual Classroom: The Power of Home Visitation," *The Journal of Adventist Education* 82:1 (January-March 2020): 30-33.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. All Scripture texts in this article are quoted from the *New International Version* of the Bible. Scripture quotations credited to NIV are from *The Holy Bible, New International Version*. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc. Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.
2. Arthritis Foundation, "What Is Arthritis?" (n.d.): <https://www.arthritis.org/about-arthritis/understanding-arthritis/what-is-arthritis.php>.
3. Paulo Freire, *Teachers as Cultural Workers* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1998), 72-73.
4. Ellen G. White, *True Education: An Adaptation of Education* (Nampa, Idaho: Pacific Press, 2000), 177.