

Essays on Teaching Excellence

Toward the Best in the Academy

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The Why of Teacher/Student Relationships

Richard G. Tiberius, *University of Toronto*

I have difficulty keeping a secret, especially if it is good news. Recently I found myself enthusiastically recommending my plumber to a neighbor. "He did efficient, clean work," I said proudly. My neighbor seemed pleased to have the phone number but was obviously startled when I added that "we have a good relationship with him, too." My neighbor inquired, with a grin that was just a little too broad, "Is he fixing the sink or moving in?" I took his point - plumbers, auto mechanics and computer technicians should concentrate on the "things" that they are supposed to repair. Rapport with the people who own these things is a frill, a social nicety that could be annoying to busy people. Of course I could have argued that the helpful discussion we had with the plumber about alternative replacement taps owed its success to our mutual trust and rapport. But I sensed that I would cut a rather quixotic figure trying to take on the world on my hobby horse of interpersonal relationships. I am usually successful in keeping a low profile about relationships, that is, until I hear someone imply that relationships are not important to teaching and learning. Then I am ready to take on windmills.

I heard it again last week, "Yeah, she has a good relationship with her students, but can she teach?", as if the two were completely separate entities, like the icing and the cake. But a teacher's relationship with learners is not icing. It is an essential component of the teaching and learning process. Plumbers and computer technicians may be able to perform useful services on sinks and

computers without entering into relation with them or with their owners but teaching simply cannot happen without teachers entering into relation with their students. Moreover, the teacher's success in facilitating learning is directly related to the quality of that relationship.

Relationships and the making of meaning Relationships are as essential to teaching as the flour in the cake. The reason that we often fail to appreciate the importance of relationships is that we have inherited misconceptions about teaching, about learning and about the nature of the mind. For thousands of years people have theorized about the mind and about learning and drawn conclusions about the nature of teaching. The earliest concepts we have of mind are of *psyche*, a Greek word for breath, because of the observed relationship between breathing and life.

Later, during the age of the machines, the mind was conceived of as a complex machine and the metaphors of teaching changed accordingly. When students ground away at problems we could hear their gears turning, unless, of course, they were a little rusty "up there." We drilled students to sharpen their minds as we would sharpen a tool.

Now we are equally certain that the mind is a kind of computer and the teacher's task is to program it. As long as the students' circuits are not fried from partying the night before, information can be fed to them at a reasonable rate and they should be able to process it.

But the mind is no more a computer than it is a mechanical device or a wind. Indeed, it is not a "thing" on which we can work. It is a process, a "meaning maker" in the words of Postman and Weingartner (1969). Learning is the process of growth of the mind, in which the learner takes an active part. You cannot force learning to happen any more than you can speed the growth of a plant by pulling on it. Learning must be constructed by the learner. The best we can do to help students learn is to connect what we say to their previous experience and knowledge. In short, we help students construct meaning from our words. And the more we know about learners, the better we can connect with them and the more likely they will be able to benefit from our experience in reconstructing

their world. The knowledge that teachers need about learners in order to connect with them is gained through interaction. Teaching is inherently interactive because it depends on making connections with an active, growing mind.

But what does interaction have to do with relationships? The relationship between teachers and learners can be viewed as a set of filters, interpretive screens or expectations that determine the effectiveness of interaction between teacher and student. Effective teachers form relationships that are trustful, open and secure, that involve a minimum of control, are cooperative, and are conducted in a reciprocal, interactive manner. They share control with students and encourage interactions that are determined by mutual agreement (Tiberius and Billson, 1991, p. 82). Within such relationships learners are willing to disclose their lack of understanding rather than hide it from their teachers; learners are more attentive, ask more questions, are more actively engaged. Thus, the better the relationship, the better the interaction; the better the interaction, the better the learning.

Relationships and the process of learning My second argument for good relationships is based on the contextual nature of the learning process. There is recent evidence that we do not learn isolated facts that are stored away in our heads like books on a library shelf; we learn them along with the context in which they are encountered. When my neighbor learned about the plumber, his brain recorded not only the telephone number but the source of the information (me), the quality of my voice (excited or not), the garden we were standing in, etc. The entire context is remembered in some manner. This is why we sometimes have to look at the telephone pad to remember our phone number or walk back to our offices to recall why we started down the hall.

Not all contexts are regarded equally by the brain. Some contexts are more salient than others, and for humans, social contexts are high on the list. I imagine that if we had evolved from solitary animals with huge teeth, like bears, social contexts would be less important than cues such as smells. But we evolved from relatively weak creatures with little teeth and no claws. We were completely dependent on social cooperation for survival. Consequently we are

exquisitely sensitive to social cues.

A few examples might be useful. One of my medical colleagues tells me that he recalls anatomy information by picturing his anatomy teacher standing in front of the room lecturing. My colleague, who is a psychiatrist, was not intrinsically interested in anatomy as a medical student, but the dramatic presence of this great anatomist, the caring he showed for his subject and for his students made a lasting impression. In the last few years I have been involved in the training of our medical teachers to become tutors in problem-based learning. One of the participants smiled when she saw that the problem for the day's lesson was one she had been given in medical school, the case of Giselle Lambier. She told us that whenever she needs information about intestinal parasites she retrieves it by thinking of Giselle. Finally, it is almost universal for my medical colleagues to retrieve medical information by thinking of previous patients with the condition in question. Their information is organized around patients and cases. The case glues together the disparate sounds, feelings, and facts and allows physicians to recognize the pattern of a disease process.

The most striking example of the contextual nature of learning for me was a negative one, a situation in which a physician could not remember a piece of information yet could very clearly remember the teacher who taught her the topic. "He was such an arrogant and offensive person," she said, "that I never learned anything from him." After all these years, she remembered the context perfectly, but had suppressed the content! In summary, learning is contextual and one of the most important contexts for human beings is other people – who said it and what is the relationship of the learner to the teacher.

Creating good relationships How do you foster relationships that lead to the most effective teaching and learning? In two articles Professor Janet Billion and I (1991) have defined a set of positive relationships between teachers and learners which we have called the "alliance." Key features underlying the alliance are mutual respect; shared responsibility for learning and mutual commitment to goals; effective communication and feedback; cooperation and willingness to negotiate conflicts and a sense of security in the classroom. We

provide a number of guidelines under each category for strengthening alliances in teaching and learning. The key to all these features, however, is a recognition of the reciprocal nature of the teaching-learning process. Both parties must participate; both must learn to trust the other. But the nature of the academy and Students' past interactions with faculty may require the teacher to take the first step toward that mutuality and possibly to continue to lead the way until the students are sufficiently confident to become full partners in the process.

References

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