THE COLLEGE TEACHER-STUDENT RELATIONSHIP

A VITAL ALLY IN CREATING A CLASSROOM CLIMATE CONDUCIVE TO MOTIVATION AND LEARNING

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In a college environment, the quality of the teacher-student relationship (TSR), which is based on interpersonal interaction, can have a decisive effect on academic success, as this bond is intended to evoke a positive reaction toward the subject matter. This relationship would therefore seem to merit further exploration, *inter alia* to establish the influence it may have on classroom climate, student motivation, and, ultimately, learning. Constructive teacher-student interaction depends on a number of factors, some of which are related to the social and educational context in which instruction takes place and others, to students' affective characteristics.

In this article, we will first examine conceptual developments in the teacher-student relationship, which are characterized by the transformation of teaching methods and the appearance of new learning preferences in recent generations of students. Next, we will analyze the nature of a quality teacher-student relationship (QTSR), focusing on how the latter can be established. Relying on some of the pertinent literature, we will then discuss the effects a QTSR can have on students. Lastly, we will examine the limitations and challenges involved in establishing a teacher-student relationship in a postsecondary context.

▶ CONCEPTUAL DEVELOPMENTS IN THE TSR

We should stipulate from the outset that the topic in question is not new (Abraham 1984; Postic 1979). In 1995, a considerable number of studies had already enabled the Conseil supérieur de l'éducation to state that an appropriate TSR was the most important condition in the quest for meaning and independence, and an indispensable ingredient if instruction were to have a significant influence on students. Since that time, several other specialists have posited that the success of any educational endeavour is based on the establishment of appropriate, significant bonds (Cosmopoulos 1999; Kubanek and Waller 1995; Marsollier and Obin 2004; Potvin 2005;

Roorda et al. 2011). Chassé (2006) also states that teaching is the craft of building relationships, and that TSR development can be incorporated into the transmission of subject content. It is not surprising, therefore, that veteran educators insist so much on the need for positive interaction, which doubtless is of considerable importance in a learning context (Kozanitis 1997).

The *Dictionnaire actuel de l'éducation* defines the teacher-student relationship as the cognitive, affective, and social interaction between learner and instructor aimed at promoting learning and personal development (Legendre 2005). Traditionally, most authors have deemed that such a relationship unites individuals with complementary goals—i.e., a teacher (the "holder" of knowledge") and students (who master that knowledge). Furthermore, as this bond is subject to the mechanisms of group dynamics, it brings together individuals who are subject to the phenomena of discussion, reciprocal influence, and diverse, asymmetrical actions and reactions as regards the perception of knowledge. This way of depicting the teacher-student relationship, however, seems not only obsolete, but at least out of step with new instructional techniques and learning contexts, especially as concerns the competency-based education and the growing use—both inside and outside the classroom—of information and communication technologies (ICTs) in teaching. ICTs have made us reconsider the role of educators (Depover, Karsenti, and Komis 2007; Georges 2012; Lebrun 2002): formerly a source of knowledge, teachers have become mediators, intermediaries between knowledge and learners, allowing the latter to figure predominantly and play an active role in the learning process. This being said, digital tools are no substitute for the TSR; they merely modify our connection to knowledge by making it more accessible.

With roots in the social-constructivist model, among others, renewed approaches enable teachers to, *inter alia*, dispense with "talking about" the subject matter; instead, instructors collaborate with students, helping them build their knowledge and skills by establishing appropriate teaching situations, which are based on mutual respect (Prégent, Bernard, and Kozanitis 2009). New educational means and methods being developed in several places throughout the world have encouraged us to expand our view of the TSR to include, in addition to the bond between teacher and student, the links among students in the same class. An increasing number of educators are varying their strategies by incorporating the
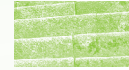
project-based and problem-solving approaches, discussions, case studies, etc.—i.e., avenues that have students interacting on a regular basis, occasionally even without instructor involvement (Ménard and St-Pierre 2014). From this perspective, the two-way communication that takes place between peers is aimed at bringing about learning, in the same way one-way communication predominates in the lecture.

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A QUALITY TSR

Many novice teachers wonder about the ideal classroom relationship. For example, should a bond of friendship be forged with students, or is it better to keep one's distance and maintain a psychological detachment? Should they adopt a strict, severe attitude or strive to be easy-going and permissive? While the nature of the TSR may vary considerably in keeping with a number of different factors, we should remember that its primary aim is to create a meaningful bond between teacher and student, as well as a climate that is conducive to teaching and learning. The usual influencing factors are the characteristics of the environment (e.g., class size), clientèle (e.g., age group), and educational stream (technical or pre-university, in particular).

Given these factors, the teacher-student relationship, in our view, resembles the ties between parent and child more than a bond of friendship, even though it has several aspects in common with the latter (respect, tolerance, trust). On the other hand, opting for an excessively permissive or authoritarian teaching style is decidedly not the solution if one wishes to create a classroom climate conducive to learning. For educators, what is most important is the right balance —i.e., clear, definite limits established in keeping with an appropriate TSR, plus a knowledge of their own strengths and weaknesses. The presence of an authority figure helps students grow (morally and intellectually) while at the same time imposing lines that cannot be crossed. In this regard, opinion polls involving college and university students show the latter prefer that instructors be capable of maintaining order, helping them learn, keeping them busy, as well as being fair (not having favourites or scapegoats), kind, respectful, and pleasant; students also appreciate a good sense of humour (Langevin 1996). This would indicate they appreciate a flexible but demanding classroom atmosphere in which the TSR is of capital importance.

Educators should not hesitate to personalize their relationship with students, while ensuring that this "investment" is properly balanced so they can remain helpful and professional. Cosmopoulos (1999) warns us of certain potential pitfalls: behaviour that is too cold could be taken as didactic or boring and dogmatic, whereas a relationship that is too close could prove unproductive, harmful, or even irregular. The search for balance must be determined by the teacher's sense of responsibility. From this perspective, the TSR must be founded in a sincere interest in students' future, from a learning point of view. Teacher and student become partners with the same goal: academic success and optimal skills development. In this context, educators undertake to play the role of coach and guide, and are accessible, ready to listen, and empathetic. They must also take care to be true to themselves, to avoid any temptation not to be genuine: students are quick to notice if this occurs.

Given that the learning climate is one of the main factors felt by students when they enter the classroom, it is up to instructors to ensure that this climate is pleasant and conducive to learning (Hughes and Chen 2011; Liberante 2012). Creating an atmosphere that evokes positive emotions in students is therefore vital, and largely based on the establishment of a relationship founded on both mutual respect and trust. Moreover, regardless of student characteristics and the prevailing environment, the creation and maintenance of a QTSR depends primarily on the instructor. Two vital factors stand out by their effect on the teacher-student relationship: the teacher's attitude toward students, and interpersonal communication. These closely linked factors become engines for promoting the group's social cohesiveness, thereby ensuring lasting harmony between teacher and students.

INSTRUCTOR ATTITUDES AND INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION

Teachers' attitudes and conduct have a considerable effect on the classroom climate, and should be inspired by values such as respect, justice, and equity, as students are sensitive to measures taken to establish a meaningful TSR. Adopting caring behaviour is relatively simple, and requires also a minimum of time and effort. Furthermore, such behaviour is within everyone's reach, as it can be developed and enhanced via the relevant training and reflection (Lenoir 2012). The issue is vital, as it consists in creating a bond of trust, which, as we have said before, is essential to establishing an appropriate TSR. If educators are respectful, empathetic, tolerant, understanding, open-minded, flexible, accessible, interested

in others, concerned, and kind, they will find their students display the same qualities. Small positive gestures and seemly behaviour can make all the difference when establishing a suitable relationship and conditions conducive to success for the greatest number. For example, teachers will gain by showing they enjoy being in the presence of their students; demonstrating their accessibility and determination to help them reach the learning objectives involved; generally being pleasant and remaining patient in the face of adversity; using humour to defuse unpleasant situations; and also seizing the opportunity to interact with students, both inside and outside the classroom. In this regard, the research has shown that frequent informal meetings reinforce the trust felt by students toward faculty (Jaasma and Koper 1999).

Despite the kinds of problems encountered, teachers must always consider their position of authority in regard to students, and avoid adopting behaviour that could belittle them. Sarcasm, pettiness, and harsh words, for example, can generate resentment, shame, anger as well as bitterness, and negatively affect classroom climate. In the large majority of cases, creating an open, seemly dialogue helps solve any problems that arise.

Interpersonal communication is a professional skill that must be mastered at any price, and constitutes educators' primary mediation tool. In an educational context, there are three degrees of interpersonal communication, as determined by the openness of the teacher (Archambault and Chouinard 2009). With respect to the first, instructors focus exclusively on the task of teaching: they do not discuss any personal feelings or outside interests. The second degree of interpersonal communication involves a relative amount of observable openness—i.e., instructors can discuss situations related to school without touching on those affecting their personal lives. With the third, openness is almost complete: teachers share a number of facts, concerns, and personal values and discuss their personal lives in order to show their human side.
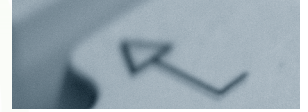
The teacher's personality, circumstances, class history, culture, and social customs are the main factors influencing the degree of openness. Some conduct may reflect the instructor's focus and facilitate interpersonal communication (e.g., maintaining visual contact with the class by "scanning" the classroom; learning the first names, interests, and expectations of each student in the course; taking an interest in their activities; and talking with them during breaks and before or after class. Teachers can also eat lunch with their students or take part in community and social events organized by the college.

◗ EFFECTS OF THE TSR

The quality of the TSR can have a marked effect on students' affective and cognitive development, and this positive influence may be observed at all academic levels (Chassé 2006; Gregory and Ripski 2008). Moreover, contrary to what might be believed, such bonds tend to be more important as those levels rise. Bujold and Saint-Pierre (1996) showed that older students, as much if not more than younger ones, need to feel that faculty respect their opinions and care about their interests. Broadly speaking, students like to know they can go to their teacher at any time, in the strictest confidence and without being judged, whether to discuss academic matters or personal problems; they want to be able to count on the instructor's ability to listen, empathize, and show consideration (warmth, acceptance, and tolerance). They also value an authentic, sincere, and genuine attitude and actions that are consistent with words, which involves the sharing of concerns and personal values, originality, and a certain level of humility.

A review of the literature by Chassé (2006) mentions the many advantages of adopting a position that reflects sincere thoughtfulness toward students, especially with respect to academic success. Such conduct makes faculty more human in the eyes of students, who identify with the individual "inside" the teacher and put more trust in him or her, as they feel valued as individuals. By personalizing their approach and maintaining a special relationship with students, educators help promote a cordial atmosphere, develop students' social skills, and also encourage them to cooperate with their classmates, thereby creating an environment conducive to mutual support. A QTSR facilitates the transition from high school to postsecondary studies, in addition to the social adjustment involved. Besides, the creation of a meaningful TSR is an effective preventive measure and basic classroom-management strategy (Gregory and Ripski 2008). By establishing positive relationships with students, teachers can prevent problem situations from arising in class, which tends to reduce the disciplinary action taken. Furthermore, a positive TSR results in reduced absenteeism, relational problems, and behavioural difficulties (Murray and Malmgren 2005).

Furthermore, several studies report that the quality of the TSR significantly influences student motivation and engagement in learning (Anderman and Kaplan 2008; Deci and Ryan 2002; Klem and Connell 2004; Kozanitis, Desbiens, and Chouinard 2008; Kuh 2003). Students' interest in course content seems somehow enhanced when teachers shows they care (Bujold and Saint-Pierre 1996). When at ease in a learning situation, students are more likely to take risks and con-

centrate on the task at hand (Kozanitis and Chouinard 2009); their confidence in their ability to succeed has a positive effect on their determination to succeed. Conversely, when students feel discouraged or incapable of learning, teaching them and helping them learn becomes more difficult.

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A positive TSR also helps students enjoy their studies, increase their resilience with respect to academic success, and reduce the feelings of solitude experienced by some. According to Kubanek and Waller (1995), learning and persistence to graduation are enhanced by individual contact with the teacher, while failure and changes in academic focus are associated with a distant attitude. The creation of a QTSR also helps offset the negative effects that may result from class size, the professional experience of the instructor, and the availability of material resources. Despite their best intentions, however, educators cannot completely control the consequences of the TSR, because it is governed by irrational phenomena (e.g. sympathy and antipathy). Several vernacular expressions, such as "a real spark" and "having good chemistry", illustrate these phenomena, which determine the natural affinities that can exist between two people. The next few paragraphs discuss certain problems involved in establishing an appropriate teacher-student relationship.

▶ LIMITS AND CHALLENGES INVOLVED IN ESTABLISHING A TSR

While desirable in any circumstances, the creation of interpersonal rapport in the field of education may be subject to certain limits. For example, large class size makes creating a meaningful relationship with each student more difficult, if not impossible. In this case, instructors have to make a greater effort (Meece, Herman, and McCombs 2003). Some situations involve additional challenges; for example, students who are demanding or have behavioural difficulties require more attention, but it is worth taking the time to get to know them better, so as to understand what underlies their attitude. By taking a few minutes to talk to these individuals, teachers can make minor adjustments to their courses in order to meet the students' needs or take better account of their interests, thereby helping them develop a sense of trust (Gregory and Ripski 2008).

It goes without saying that establishing a positive TSR constitutes only one component in a large repertoire of teaching strategies; it should be considered a complement to other aspects of teaching (Prégent, Bernard, and Kozanitis 2009). Furthermore, despite its importance, a good rapport with students is no guarantee, in itself, of a climate that is conducive to learning. Indeed, from a teacher-training standpoint, procedural knowledge also plays a considerable role. Lessons must be planned thoroughly in the short and the long term; provided it is suitable, this structure gives teachers more confidence when dealing with problem situations.

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In conclusion, studies on the TSR and its ability to promote a climate conducive to teaching and learning show that instructors who take an interest in creating harmonious relationships in the classroom and build on those relationships are more likely to be perceived as helpful and caring by their students. This in turn promotes academic success. Furthermore, in order to cultivate a beneficial, motivating relationship, all educators would be wise to adopt an attitude and a style of interpersonal communication that reflects respect, kindness, interest, and sincere concern. ◗

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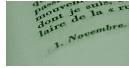
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