

Classroom Relationships

By

Kimberlee Bethany Bonura, PhD

Assistant Director, Center for Teaching Excellence, US Military Academy

“One looks back with appreciate to the brilliant teachers, but with gratitude to those who touched our human feelings. The curriculum is so much necessary raw material, but warmth is the vital element for the growing plant and for the soul of the child.” – Carl Jung

When students believe that their peers and teachers like and respect them, they are more likely to achieve academic success (Goodenow, 1993; Ladd, 1990; Ryan & Patrick, 2001). “Research is clear on this point: Effective teachers are warm, caring individuals who, through a variety of statements and actions, communicate a respect for their students, an acceptance of them as they are, and a genuine concern about their well-being,” (Ormrod, 2003, p. 482). There are many benefits for developing positive relationships with students – students who feel cared for by their teachers and in their learning environments experience higher self-efficacy for learning, enjoy learning more, are more likely to request needed help, less likely to cheat, and more likely to achieve at high levels (Hayes, Ryan, & Zseller, 1994; Kim, Solomon, & Roberts, 1995; Murdock, Hale, Weber, Tucker, & Briggs, 1999; Osterman, 2000; Ryan & Patrick, 2001; Ryan, Pintrich, & Midgley, 2001; Wentzel & Wigfield, 1998). Further, Gorham and Millette (1997) indicate that students attribute demotivation (i.e., loss of motivation for academic performance) to teacher behavior, including lack of enthusiasm. Classroom relationships matter in both the traditional classroom and in the modified classroom of an online learning community, where technology strategies need to be developed in ways that support the development of classroom relationships (Bennett, 1999).

The effects of student-teacher relationships are enduring. In one study (Hamre & Pianta, 2001), children were tracked from kindergarten through eight-grade. The quality of the child-teacher relationship in kindergarten predicted academic and behavioral outcomes through 8th grade, even when controlling for gender, ethnicity, cognitive ability, and student behavior ratings. The authors reported a strong, persistent relationship between early teacher-child relationships and later school performance. While early educational environments are influential in student development, teacher-student relationships continue to matter across the educational experience, including the college classroom. The quality of interaction between teacher and student and between students in the classroom will impact both student motivation to learn and student learning outcomes. Palmer (1993) emphasizes that good teaching is more than mere technique or content. Rather, good teaching is built, at least in part, on what Palmer calls critical moments – in a critical moment, students encounter a learning opportunity and either open to it or shut down, based on the teacher’s reaction. The teacher-student relationship and the student-student relationship determine whether students feel safe to open to learning in the critical moment. Likewise, Curzon-Hobson (2002) indicates that trust is a critical component of the higher

education environment and a foundation for the learning environment. Relationships matter in the classroom, then, because they determine whether or not students learn.

Classroom Climate

The *classroom climate* impacts how students feel about both the learning situation and the learning experience (Ormrod, 2003). Instructors can facilitate a supportive classroom climate by implementing basic strategies which include: showing acceptance, respect, and caring for students; establishing a businesslike but nonthreatening atmosphere; communicating appropriate messages about the relevance of the subject matter; allowing students to experience some control in the classroom and learning environment; and creating a sense of community (Ormrod). A cooperative classroom environment (as opposed to a competitive classroom environment) will increase both student productivity and intrinsic motivation for learning (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Creating a sense of community in the classroom will increase student engagement and support learning (Ormrod).

Need for Relatedness

All people have a need for social connection and the experience of secure connection, love, and respect with other individuals, or a *need for relatedness* (Ryan & Deci, 2000). This need for relatedness is relevant for faculty, as it impacts human motivation. Students' needs for motivation may impact their relationships with both their teachers and with their classroom peers (Ormond, 2003). Relatedness needs may impact students by motivating them to choose social activities over academic work (Dowson & McInerney, 2001; Wigfield, Eccles, MacIver, Reuman & Midgley, 1991). Students may be concerned with what others think of them, which can be expressed either by attempting to present a certain image (Juvonen, 2000) or by supporting and helping peers in order to gain positive regard (Dowson & McInerney; Ford, 1996). Relatedness needs are expressed in two main forms: *need for affiliation* and *need for approval*.

Students with a high need for affiliation may focus on connecting with peers, which can interfere with the learning process. Wentzel and Wigfield (1998) suggest teaching strategies support teaching and affiliation, to increase student motivation for learning tasks. Group-based activities (debates, cooperative learning tasks, educational games, etc) can all support learning and affiliation simultaneously (Brophy, 1987; Urda & Maehr, 1995). Students will also seek affiliation with their instructor (Ormrod, 2003). When students feel personally valued by their instructor, they are more likely to succeed academically (Phelan, Davidson, & Cao, 1991).

Students with a high need for approval have a desire to experience the positive judgments of others (Igoe & Sullivan, 1991; Juvonen & Weiner, 1993; Urda & Maehr, 1995). Approval needs can focus on peers (and lead to increased susceptibility to peer pressure, Ormrod, 2003) and on the instructor. Student needs for instructor approval can increase motivation for good grades (Hinkley, McInerney, & Marsh, 2001), but can also lead to a dependence on praise (Harter, 1975; Rose & Thornburg, 1984).

Teacher Expectations

Teacher expectations for student performance impact student performance. Teachers communicate their expectations for student performance in both subtle and obvious ways. Teachers often provide additional time and content cues when asking questions of a high-

expectation student, which communicates the belief that the student is competent to answer correctly (Woolfolk, 2005; Allington, 1980; Good & Brophy, 2003; Rosenthal, 1995). In grading assignments, teachers will interpret an almost-correct answer more favorably for high expectation students than for low expectation students (Finn, 1972). Likewise, teachers are more likely to smile, lean forward, and nod when listening to high-expectation students speak, which communicates positive affect and encouragement (Woolfolk & Brooks, 1985).

Theoretical Perspectives on Social Motivation

According to Anderman and Kaplan (2008) the domain of social motivation, and in particular its impact on academic performance, is still new and evolving. However, Anderman and Kaplan identify the three main focuses in social motivation theory and research as: (1) social motives, a focus on the social processes and social goals that direct behavior, (2) social relationships, and the role of interpersonal relationships and interaction (with teachers, peers, and even parents) and its impact on academic behavior, and (3) the social domain, including a more generalized sense of student belonging and identification with school. Anderman and Kaplan point out that any understanding of relationship and its impact of academic motivation and performance must consider cultural processes and cultural influence.

Theory into Practice: Classroom Relationships in the Classroom

Strategies for successful implementation:

- (1) Communicate respect for your students (Ormrod, 2003). Develop relationships with students as individuals, and focus on student strengths. Supporting a student's capability increases student self-confidence, which increases performance.
- (2) Strive to treat all of your students equally. According to Woolfolk (2005), strategies for avoiding the negative effects of teacher expectations include: flexible grouping strategies, offering material at a level which challenges all students, being cognizant of responses used for correct and incorrect work for high-achieving and low-achieving students, maintaining fairness in evaluation, and monitoring nonverbal behavior.
- (3) Teaching strategies which support relationship needs and facilitate the development of relationships in the classroom include: teacher questions, class discussions, reciprocal teaching, technology-based discussions, cooperative learning, and peer tutoring (Ormrod, 2003).
- (4) Davis (1993) suggests that teachers learn as many of their students' names as class size permits and that teachers encourage students to learn each other's names and interests. In small classes, introductions and class activities can increase general comfort and familiarity. In large classes, instructors can assign small working-groups or cohorts, to facilitate relatedness within the larger class setting.

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Annotated Readings:

Anderman, L.H., & Kaplan, A. (2008). The role of interpersonal relationships in student motivation: Introduction to the special issue. *The Journal of Experimental Education*, 76, 115 – 119.

Anderman & Kaplan are the editors of a special edition of the Journal of Experimental Education, which focuses on Social Motivation and its impact on academic performance. Their introduction to the special edition addresses current theoretical themes and research directions in the field and provides a generalized overview of the issue of social motivation and its impact on education.

Bennett, K. (1999). *Building technology in college classrooms through technology*. ERIC Guide.

Bennett discusses strategies and techniques to promote a sense of community and relationship in the online classroom, and technological strategies that can enhance community and relationship building in the traditional college classroom. She discusses application of strategies including websites, digital photography, and chat rooms.

Curzon-Hobson, A. (2002). A pedagogy of trust in higher learning. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 7, 265 – 276.

Curzon-Hobson discusses the complex issues related to trust in the classroom and between teacher and student, and the issue of trust as a foundational and necessary condition for higher learning. Curzon-Hobson discusses the challenges facing a teacher attempting to build trust in the teacher-student relationship, and the benefits of doing so. Further, Curzon-Hobson discusses the theoretical issues related to trust and learning.

Rosenthal, R. (1995). Critiquing Pygmalion: A 25-year perspective. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 4, 171 – 172.

This brief letter is a response by Rosenthal to a critic of his original work, published with L. Jacobson, *Pygmalion in the Classroom*, 1968. Rosenthal briefly reviews the Pygmalion effect (i.e., the effect that teacher expectations have on student performance) and disputes criticisms of the theory. Though brief, this is a contemporary update on a key psychological theory and includes key references for further information.

Ryan, R.M., & Deci, E. (2000). Self-Determination Theory and the facilitation of intrinsic motivation, social development, and well-being. *American Psychologist*, 55, 68 – 78.

Deci and Ryan's Self-Determination Theory (proposed in 1985) is a foundational theory in the area of human motivation and relationship. Deci and Ryan propose that there are three innate psychological needs (competence, autonomy, and relatedness) which impact motivation, and discuss the impact of these motivations on domains including education. This article in the *American Psychologist* reviews and discusses current applications of their theory.