

# RELATIONSHIP BUILDING IN THE ONLINE CLASSROOM

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## ABSTRACT

*As the educational arena develops and changes, the concept of relationship building is becoming increasingly difficult. The necessity of building relationships is going to be clearly established in this paper through the review of current research which promotes the notion of connection between teacher-student relationship and students' overall success rate. In reference to students' success, that term in particular will be clearly defined as it relates to the classroom performance and later application of the acquired skills in a real-world setting. This paper will explore some of the challenges and opportunities within the realm of relationship building focusing primarily on an online arena.*

*Keywords: relationship building, online environment, teacher-student relationship, students' success rate.*

## INTRODUCTION

Building relationship is a challenge in all venues of life, classroom being no exception. Relationship building enhances the learning process, ensures smooth communication, and ultimately creates a learning environment which is more likely to promote achievement of course objectives while increasing retention and students' success rate. This paper attempts to address the following questions: How important is the concept of relationship building in an academic setting? Is teacher-student relationship correlated with students' success rate? What are the differences between relationships building in a traditional versus online classroom? The purpose of this paper is to explore the unique challenges of building relationships in an online classroom setting.

## SIGNIFICANCE OF RELATIONSHIP BUILDING

Teachers have a unique ability which may be coded as an opportunity but also a great responsibility to reach out and build relationships with students in each new classroom. As per the old saying, "People do not care how much you know until they know how much you care", one can never underestimate the importance of human connection in all venues of life, the world of academia being no exception (Hartman, 2010, p.42). In this simple saying one may find an actual answer as to why relationship building is of such a high importance.

Within a few weeks or a few months (depending on the duration of a particular class), teachers can make a difference in someone's life, inspire a student to do better, strive to do more, and ultimately succeed. Not only is students' success more like-

ly to occur through relationship building in a particular class, but can also transfer to a success within their program in general enabling them to take those success traits into their future career.

Relationship building in a classroom can help students in building their own unique social skills and their concept of self-determination which is achieved through teacher's unique classroom management, student interaction, model behavior, and ultimately their own unique style of classroom leadership (Field & Hoffman, 2012). The direct correlation between the teacher's behavior in a classroom, relationship they have with students, and students' academic as well as behavioral success were portrayed through several different studies explored by Helker and Ray (2009). While direct correlation appears to be widely accepted, there are still many opportunities on behalf of both traditional and online colleges to make the relationship building process more streamline and efficient.

Some studies explore relationship building at all educational levels, starting with the elementary school. Promoting better understanding and communication between students, teachers, administrators, and parents ultimately leads to a conclusion that the better the actual relationship is the less of a need educators have to reinforce discipline within the classroom setting (Sterrett, 2012). Communication, as such, should not be much of an issue within a traditional classroom setting. The other story in itself is how one needs to work on building similar relationship in an online setting without having a benefit of seeing his/her students and being able to communicate with them in a more traditional face to face manner. The authors do not want to put a label of increased difficulty on the relationship building ventures in an online setting but are venturing out to establish that the relationship building path in an online setting may require some increased creativity, flexibility, and persistence on behalf of the online faculty members.

Without going any further, one should first question the need and the significance of a relationship building in a classroom. The general consensus is that courses are more effective and students more engaged if they feel connected to a professor. This relationship, created out of necessity in a classroom setting by the share nature of teacher-student frequent interactions, can evolve into the one of trust, mutual respect, and at times admiration. Can classrooms function without this type of relationship involvement? The answer is decisively yes! The more important question if courses can be equally effective without this additional layer of relationship development remains open. How does one build relationship in a face to face classroom setting? Easy, say some teachers while others feel that relationship building takes quite a bit of work. As with anything else, one may venture to do in life, some relationship building activities come natural to some educators while others may not perceive it as an effortless task. Ensuring grading feedback is prompt, plenty of constructive feedback is provided, lectures are engaging,

and instructions are clear, may be a good start of a good face to face relationship building path. What comes after these well-established standards may make a difference between a superb teacher/student relationship and a mediocre one.

## **RELATIONSHIP BUILDING – LUXURY OR NECESSITY**

Can one function without reaching the upper levels of relationship pyramid in a classroom? The answer is yet again yes! How effective can one be in a “relationship free” classroom is another question. If classroom effectiveness is connected to the relationship building then this activity should not be option and should not be an afterthought or one of the “if it happens- happens” situations. Instead it should be worked on, encouraged, and made into one of the focus areas for the instructors regardless of their personal teaching style, recognition of the importance of relationship building, and their own passion and/or preference when it comes to connecting to their students. Now, if failure is a non-option, how much is too much? At what point of time do we allow ourselves and others to overstep the boundaries we may be comfortable with within a classroom setting? Is relationship building “an absolute must” for a classroom success? Is it a “must have” or a “nice to have” feature? Are students and teachers who fail to build a meaningful relationship less likely to accomplish some of the class objectives?

While it is impossible to address all of the above mentioned questions at once, one has to attempt to establish a clear connection between the relationship building and achievement of course learning outcomes and/or student success rates. In order to tackle that challenge, the authors attempted to answer one core question. How does one define students’ success? Is success defined in terms of good grades, course learning outcomes being accomplished, or in terms of students being able to apply the acquired skills outside of the school venue? Real-world applicability of skills learned in school is a high priced commodity more important nowadays than in the past due to the volatile economic situation and an ever-demanding job market. If one answers the above phrased question –all of the above -then a connection between relationship building and the student success rates needs to be explored and clearly established.

## **WIN-WIN SITUATION**

Relationship building and its importance is clearly emphasized as early on as the elementary education level. Nobody needs to “sell” parents, teachers, and students on the importance of these early relationship building opportunities. However, somewhere along the line, that well-established pattern of relationship building is not as strictly reinforced or “advertised” as students pursue higher level degrees. Some researchers argue that the importance of relationship building sadly seems to be diminishing in the eyes of the key players “Relationships are seen as secondary and they should be higher on the priority list. It is our contention that if principals spend more time building relationships with students, teachers, parents, and community members, test scores will rise and discipline referrals will diminish” (Rieg & Marcoline, 2008, p. 14). It is only when all stakeholders see and appreciate the importance of relationship

building in relations to test scores, course learning outcomes, and better educated students in general, will this particular concept see its revival and be approached with more urgency.

The necessity of relationship building and changes with how faculty members approach this concept evolve with the growth of modern universities. Johnson indicated two decades ago that, “the me” and “do your own thing” classroom has been successfully replaced by “we” and “we are all in this together classroom” leading to a culture of interdependence and mutuality (Johnson, 1991, p. 20). Cornelius-White recognizes an interesting concept of Person-centered education defined as, “a counseling-originated, educational psychology model, overripe for meta-analysis, that posits that positive teacher-student relationships are associated with optimal, holistic learning (2007, p.113). Based on this research is the notion that within the realm of person-centered education teacher-student relationship ultimately flourishes. On the other end of this spectrum is the idea that teacher-student relationship encourages and promotes person-centered approach.

Are stakes higher nowadays when it comes to relationship building at a college level? Some researchers believe so reflecting on both the costs of college tuition and benefits one may get from earning the higher education considering the highly competitive job markets of today. Not having a college degree appears to be luxury many young job seekers cannot afford. Then the “devil’s advocate” approach may be that if one has to get a college degree no matter what, why invest oneself and others in a laborious venture of establishing, building, and maintaining classroom relationship (regardless of the educational platform-online or traditional). The answer is simple. Teachers who build productive relationships with their students may have an easier time successfully reaching the course objectives and may have more students who are successfully absorbing the required materials. On the other hand, students who successfully build those same relationships may have an easier time in successfully mastering the course concepts, passing their courses with the higher grades, and be increasingly motivated to do well in future classes. Ultimately, relationship building promotes both retention and a graduation rates.

So what appears to be an issue here? Research community agrees that research building is a great benefit to the classroom experience (traditional and online). Students experience more meaningful interaction and tend to learn better if they establish a good relationship with their teachers. Teachers experience a more productive environment where teaching and learning process becomes smoother. Why this “win-win” relationship building opportunity is not pursued every single time in every single class. The answer is simple- it is not easy to build relationship. It is not necessarily a natural process which comes without much effort. It takes time, it takes energy, and at times failure is a possibility. A good intentional message from a teacher may be misinterpreted ruining the fragile relationship. An authoritarian figure in a classroom demands respect but is not necessarily perceived as welcoming. One may argue that this is a balancing act. How can teachers maintain their required level of authority, maintain respect, and ensure proper procedures are being followed while working on a nurturing, welcoming, and open classroom environment where free flow of ideas and productive exchange is one of its pillars? The answer is not easy-it takes time to establish one’s authority while

building relationship without jeopardizing each of the two concepts. This comes natural to some, and not so much to others. It is a gift, a craft, a science or all of the above. It is however a necessity, one without which one may jeopardize the learning experience and the proper balance is a quite sensitive one.

## **UNIQUE CHALLENGES- CONCEPT OF PRESENCE**

The core topic of this paper is relationship building in an online classroom which carries within itself some unique challenges in comparison to some more traditional relationship building venues. Picciano (2002) goes no further than the concept of presence which is a bit harder to define in an online setting. Furthermore, Picciano establishes that both students and faculty typically report increased satisfaction in online settings based not only on the quantity but also quality of interactions (2002). If presence is one of the requirements for a face-to-face setting how is this same presence defined in an online setting? Presence, as such, is established in an online discussion boards, ask a question forums, online chat areas, and assignment areas. In each one of those “presence” venues, teachers have a unique opportunity to go above and beyond the physical presence, so easily established in a traditional setting and build a productive relationship with their students through many different forms of presence establishment. Frequent participation in each discussion boards, prompt replies to student questions, substantial grading feedback, and other online activities establish more than a share presence and are capable of proper relationship building. It is not only the issue of frequent interaction but the quality interactions which can enhance teacher-student relationship. Wallace (2003) takes it one step further and introduces the concept of “social aspects of online teaching and learning such as the development of community, the social roles of teachers and students, and the creation of online presence” (p.242). The concept of presence is yet again established but a social component is given to the activities which promote teacher-student interaction and ultimately both parties’ presence. Hartman connects the concept of relationship building to that of the emotional intelligence indicating that, “self-awareness, managing emotions, empathy, and the ability to manage relationships in others are the province of emotional IQ” (Hartmann, 2010, p.43).

## **RELATIONSHIP BUILDING IN AN ONLINE CLASSROOM**

Throughout this paper, it was already established that relationship building in a traditional classroom setting appears to face fewer challenges in comparison to the one reinforced in a virtual /online setting. Teachers need to be leaders first and foremost in both traditional and virtual classrooms. As such, addressing how one leads while developing relationships needs to be addressed. Building trust is an integral part of building relationship through “sustained process of relationship building, idea generation, prioritization, and selection” while increasing online participants’ cooperation, making them fully involved in the process, with the sense of self-interest being fulfilled while trusting the others (teachers, fellow students alike), regardless

of how “such a trust, appears to be fragile and temporarily” (Pauleen, 2003, pp.227-256). Some researchers argue that relationship building in virtual setting has a completely different framework in comparison to its traditional counterparts. Jawadi, Daassi, Favier, and Kalika (2013), embrace Leadership Behavior Complexity Theory (BCT) which, “presents the behaviors and roles of effective leaders in a context with a high level of ambiguity and complexity” (p.200). Furthermore, the researchers indicated that virtual leaders (teachers for the purposes of this paper) have multiple communication channels with “various level of richness” through “task related actions and positive and dynamic behaviors” (p. 302). While one can definitely argue that communication channels at the disposal of online teachers are quite diverse, the quality of relationship building may be hard to assess at first in comparison to its traditional counterpart. For example, some faculty members are capable of providing alternative ways of corresponding with students all of which can enhance relationship building.

Skeptics of online learning express their concern when it comes to the ability of online students and faculty members to create a sense of community and collegial relationships (Hurst, Cleveland-Innes, Hawranik, Gauvreau, 2013). The notion that a true sense of community, collegial experience, and personal relationship with one’s teacher may be difficult, if not impossible, in an online setting is not a new one. Online educators and students alike appear to be addressing these skeptical views from the offset of online learning proving again and again that productive and meaningful relationships are formed as a result of quality interaction regardless of the venue. Cerniglia found that, “providing alternative ways for online students to express themselves, giving video feedback that includes audio and non-verbal communication cues, and carefully navigating written interactions with students, online learning can actually meet the needs and allow more relationship building than face-to-face classrooms” (p. 54). One can definitely argue that online faculty members have more communication vehicles at

their disposal in comparison to their traditional counterparts. The key is to ensure those additional venues are used in an effective manner and are enhancing the learning experience versus creating a “busy work” for both students and faculty members. If students have a discussion board, chat board, ask your instructor board, etc. at their disposal, they can have a wide variety of experiences under each one of the above mentioned boards uniquely rich in nature surpassing any communication experiences they might have had in a traditional setting. On the other end of that spectrum, if not properly monitored, maintained, and ran by the faculty members, each one of these communication vehicles can be pointless without truly enhancing students’ learning and experiences creating a sense of completing a “chore” in order to get from one point in class to another versus truly communicating. There are some clear obstacles in certain areas of online communication which make its face-to-face communication counterparts superior. For example, use of humor, so crucial for human interaction, may be quite a bit easier in a traditional classroom. Humor cannot be neglected when it comes to its importance in relationship building. Kurtzberg, Naquin & Belkin (2009) indicate that, “early research on communication has suggested that only 7 percent of what we understand someone to have said comes from the words themselves, while 55 percent of the meaning comes

from facial expressions and posture, and another 38 percent comes from voice inflections and tone” (pp. 377-379). Considering that facial expression and posture plays such an important part in communication, humor being no exception, an online joke which is well-intended as a relationship builder can “backfire” quite a bit. Therefore, Kurtzberg et. al. suggest for personal relationship to be established prior to professional one (2009). What is a solution- remain serious at all times? Of course not!

Without any humor, it would be incredibly hard to build relationships online. Faculty members should not be deprived of this great relationship builder- they just need to be quite careful. Simple proofreading of their messages ensuring it will be well taken and understood by the wide audience can do the trick. This may be possible in an online classroom through a warm welcoming email and/or announcement in which a certain degree of appropriate humor is introduced. This may do wonders in putting students at a comfort level and encouraging proactive and productive communication. The first few messages instructors post in an online classroom may set the stage for all further communication efforts.

Another concept to consider is what faculty-student relationship does to student-student relationship in an online classroom. Wade, Cameron, Morgan & Williams (2011) discuss the phenomenon of student perceptions, “of the importance of interpersonal relationships in online groups affect their perceptions of trust within the group” and how that ultimately impacts their learning experience (p.383). The sense of trust is a reoccurring theme in both sets of relationships between both students and faculty /student relationship in an online setting. Therefore, the trickle-down effect of good communication practices which lead to a successful relationship building between faculty members and students impacts the communication patterns and interpersonal relationship between students themselves ultimately resulting in trust building amongst all parties. Relationship cannot exist without trust and trust cannot be built without a relationship. The cycle of trust and relationship can be present in an online classroom equally effective as in the traditional setting if proper effort is put into nurturing these at times sensitive concepts.

## FAIR VERSUS UNFAIR COMPARISON

The quantity of communication is certainly present though discussion boards, chat forums, grading feedback areas, emails, phone calls and texts (if offered) but the much needed face to face instantaneous confirmation of how well an intended message is received is lacking. The authors of this paper will venture out to state that online teachers carry a heavier burden of being in “tune” with their students’ emotions, reading the “in between the lines” messages presented under the discussion forum and via email, and being more cognizant of students’ mindset than in a traditional setting. Surprisingly due to the wide-variety of communication vehicles in an online setting and the fact that one does not see another face to face, many students are more at the comfort level to reach out, communicate, question, complain, and at times share their personal struggles than they probably would have ever been in a traditional classroom. Seeing the efforts faculty members put into relationship building is not easy for students as they observe differences in

teaching styles, communication patterns, and general approach on behalf of the faculty. All of these differences can guide students in determining the difference in relationship building efforts of individual faculty. However, as with anything in life, each faculty may have his/her unique relationship building approach in their classrooms. Being judged prematurely for not making a solid effort on behalf of the students would be unfair unless the review of the entire classroom experience is conducted. Therefore, faculty relationship building comparison may be misleading at best and/or unfair at its worst.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this paper explored the importance of relationship building in online classrooms as it relates to student success rates, meeting course learning outcomes, and enhancing the learning experience. The evaluation of differences between relationship building in an online versus traditional classroom was attempted as related to the ease of establishing relationship and difference in quality of relationship in each of the two learning platforms. Furthermore, the paper touched upon the core concepts of relationship building in online classes focusing on not only some of the main challenges in comparison to traditional setting but also some advantages of relationship building in this particular venue. The authors reflected on online classroom in particular discovering that despite some of the skeptical views, online classrooms may be even better positioned than traditional settings to build effective teacher-student relationship due to the multiple communication vehicles online classrooms provide in comparison to its traditional counterparts. The authors of this article are strong advocates of the importance of relationship building in an online classroom considering it as a dire necessity vs. a luxury. Therefore, both authors feel that the increased emphasis should be placed on tools and techniques which will enable faculty members to build relationship early on in their online class and in a more efficient manner making classroom relationships more impactful.

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