Factors That Make Faculty and Student Relationships Effective

Lynne E. Anderson and John Carta-Falsa

Abstract. Through qualitative analyses of narratives of what students and faculty wanted in their relationships, the authors identified three themes. The Teaching/Learning Environment theme illustrated needs for nurturing, open, nonthreatening, and respectful attitudes in student-faculty relationships. Exchange of Information students reported a desire to learn and interact with each other, but not with the instructor. With regard to Mentor/Peer Association theme, students wanted to develop networks of friends to help with course work, whereas teachers wanted to find principles of effective teaching to help students learn. Applications of this data for improving student-faculty interactions and instructional processes are discussed.

Effective, personal, and engaging modes of teaching often occur within a complex set of interpersonal relationships between students and faculty. Instructor time with students may be spent consulting with them on a cooperative learning task; processing thoughts, feelings, and lessons learned from an experiential learning community project; giving feedback on an assignment; or simply conversing one-on-one. The time, place, or even what is discussed, however, are not the important factors in building an effective relationship that promotes learning. To paraphrase Abraham Maslow, true learning happens when an individual feels a sense of safety and association with others (Biehler and Snowman 1993).

Creating a safe and secure educational environment is important for learning. In such a climate, Carl Rogers notes that the stage is set for mutual trust and respect to develop, the self-confidence of students can mature, and faculty and students are in a better position to appreciate each other’s unique qualities (1969, 1983). Such partnerships permit and encourage students and instructors to take risks by becoming active, collaborative, and exploratory. Both student and instructor flourish; they may come to perceive each other as peers, and mutual acceptance is possible.

Safe and secure educational environments facilitate the integration of new ideas and skills with older ones. However, before this integration can occur, Barbara Millis notes that they must first experience what is new to them; then, and only then, will past and present knowledge and skills become connected (1997). A critical element in such learning is the need for orchestrated tasks. These are well-planned activities designed to produce interaction among the students and between the students and the instructor. Both parties must be present and active in the classroom for this transformation process to occur (Angelo 1993).

Benefits of Personalizing Teaching in Traditional Courses

When active learning processes are used in traditional courses, and students and teachers must work together on the design of class related tasks, a number of positive outcomes occur. Research shows that as students and instructor become more motivated, opportunities to learn from each other increase, their capacity to work more productively together improves, affirmative views of each other are provided, increases in self-esteem occur, and both parties are better able to explore complex intellectual issues (Joyce, Weil, and Showers 1992). In addition, performance on course outcome measures such as exams and term papers is enhanced.

To achieve such outcomes, multiple modes of instruction are needed (Richlin and Manning 1995). There is no master key in teaching, and thus, no single teaching process can achieve the variety of outcomes noted above. Using a variety of instructional processes including such things as presentations, role-playing, debates, discussions, storytelling, and demonstrations allows for multiple learning styles to be addressed. In turn, this creates interest in the course, motivates students, and leads to student satisfaction with the instructional processes (Grasha 1996). Of course, when students are pleased with our teaching, the display of positive thoughts and feelings is contagious. Faculty also become more satisfied with the course.

An Important Question Emerged

As we began to explore teaching processes that created a safe and secure
Cooperative learning, role-plays, discussion processes, and debates seemed to change the traditional interface of students and faculty and led to outcomes that could not be achieved in more traditionally taught courses.
ate students, and 49 percent were graduate students.

Faculty Participants

Twenty-four instructors at National University in the Southern Region participated in the study. Eleven of them were male and thirteen were female. Fourteen of the instructors were adjunct faculty members, three were associate faculty, two were instructors, and the remaining three were assistant professors. Twelve of the instructors had doctorates, eight had Master’s Degrees, and one held a Bachelor of Science Degree. Instructors in the sample ranged in age from twenty-seven to sixty-five, with a mean age of 47.6. Experience in higher education ranged from one to twenty-five years of teaching, with a mean of 7.8 years.

Survey Questions

The questionnaire was designed to elicit narrative responses from students and faculty about their perceptions of relationships in higher education classrooms. The questionnaire was constructed in line with a phenomenological approach to data gathering and analysis (see Valle and Halling 1989; Pollio and Humphreys 1996). In line with this approach, our goal was to elicit open-ended responses to questions that could be analyzed by the researchers for underlying themes. Thus, the following two open-ended questions were asked of the students on the survey:

1. What kinds of relationships would you most like to have with your fellow students in your class?
2. What kinds of relationships would you most like to have with your instructor in your class?

Each question was placed on one sheet of paper, and ample space was provided for written narrative responses. The following demographic information also was obtained from the students: (a) age, (b) gender, (c) major and degree, and (d) campus where the course was taught and course number.

Instructors in the sample also were asked to write a narrative about the following question. “What kinds of relationships would you most like to have with the students in your class?” The question was on one sheet of paper that allowed ample space for the written narrative. In addition, the following demographic information was solicited from the instructors: (a) age, (b) gender, (c) rank, (d) highest degree and when awarded, (e) years in higher education and at the university, and (f) school and department of membership.

Administration of the Survey

Before bias in student-faculty relationships had an opportunity to develop, we administered the surveys to representative classes of students and instructors on the first night of class. After a brief introduction to the study, students and instructors responded to each of the questions listed above. Responding to the questionnaire was the first activity in each class session. Five minutes were allowed for the students and faculty to write their responses to the questions on the survey.

Selection of Narratives for Thematic Analysis

The 400 student responses presented a problem for doing a thematic analysis using phenomenological methods. As reported by Garko et al. (1994), Kimmel related that thematic analysis of written narratives does not require a large number of study participants. We consulted Howard Pollio, an expert in thematic analysis of narratives (see Pollio 1991). He suggested that we randomly select at least forty females and forty males for analysis with twenty graduate and twenty undergraduate students in each group of forty. Approximating Pollio’s recommendation, we randomly selected from among the 400 student answers, fifty responses to question one and an additional fifty to question two. The students selected were well represented by school, gender, and graduate and undergraduate membership. We used all of the twenty-four instructors’ written responses for analysis. Student responses and instructor responses were then analyzed separately.

Thematic Analysis Procedure

Polkinghorne described phenomenological research as the most appropriate method for viewing the social world. The phenomenological method seeks to produce a thematic structure of the experiences taken from one perspective: the verbal description of the experiences. On the basis of Polkinghorne’s premise, and the work of Pollio and Humphreys (1996), a thematic analysis protocol was applied to the collected data in the following way.

We silently read six times the written narratives until common patterns began to emerge within each question. Once the common patterns emerged and reappeared, two additional independent readers then read aloud the written responses to check on the reliability and validity of what was initially identified. Commonalties in the patterns from all readers were identified, reduced, refined, and named. Interrater reliability was estimated in the 90–95 percent range as the authors, and the independent readers had a high level of agreement.

Outcomes

Summary of Thematic Analysis

Three themes emerged from the thematic analysis of what students wanted from their relationships with other students and with their instructors, and what teachers wanted in their relationships with students. The themes were grouped into categories labeled: teaching/learning environment, exchange of information, and mentor/peer association.

For theme one, teaching/learning environment, students and instructors reported a desire for an open, supportive, comfortable, respectful, safe or non-threatening, and enjoyable interpersonal climate. The percentage of responses in each of these categories related to what instructors wanted in their relationships with students in class, what students wanted in their relationships with the instructor in class, and what students wanted in their relationships with other students in class is shown in figure 1. What teachers and students wanted in their classroom relationships with each other followed similar patterns. However, the responses of faculty were generally higher, suggesting stronger needs in each area. With regard to what they wanted in their relationships with each other in class, students did not have very strong preferences. This finding may reflect the
tendency for many courses not to have sufficient opportunities for students to interact with each other.

The qualities of the interpersonal interactions covered by the categories appear to be important factors needed to create a positive environment for teaching and learning. And, they are more likely to occur in environments where instructors and students can discuss issues in an open manner and where rapport between the two parties is high. Such an environment helps teachers and students to acknowledge and value each other’s point of view.

In the second theme, exchange of information, students reported a desire to work together, to share, and to learn and interact with each other, but they did not state a strong desire to work with the instructor. For theme three, mentor/peer association, students said they wanted to develop networks, friendships, and to work with each other, whereas instructors were more focused on principles of effective teaching and did not express a strong need to collaborate with students.

Themes two and three revealed less agreement between instructors and students and reflected self-motivated interest on the parts of the respondents. There was a definite “I” focus in the latter two themes versus a dominant “we” focus in theme one, where students and instructors were interested in establishing a mutually beneficial environment. Although teachers focused more on what they could do to facilitate learning, establishing collaborative ties with students was not mentioned as an option for doing so.

Implications of Findings

Thus, using collaboration to establish an effective personalized teaching environment may have limited appeal to a broader sample of university faculty. The views in the literature discussed earlier, and our interpretation of what was there, likely reflected a self-selection bias. That is, for faculty members who see its value, and are able to establish a climate where such interactions are possible, there are benefits. Such individuals are not representative of the majority of faculty members. In spite of the potential value of more collaborative modes of teaching, such teaching modes may not be mentioned because they are not well understood by many teachers. Faculty may need to see discipline-specific models for student-faculty collaboration to appreciate its value. Otherwise, more traditional teacher-student relationships will prevail.

There is, however, optimism in the findings regarding whether teachers might engage in more collaborative relationships. Faculty in our sample, for example, reported that they were interested in teaching strategies to promote learning. Both instructors and students were interested in establishing a classroom environment where their ideas could be acknowledged and respected. If instructors can direct their teaching towards both sets of interests, collaborative approaches to teaching are more likely to be endorsed because they promote the latter goals.

Learning environments where students and teachers work with each other facilitates the acquisition of content and skills (Millis 1997; Johnson and Johnson 1994). They also allow for a safe and effective exchange of ideas among all participants. Thus, the challenge for teachers is to orchestrate course activities in which students and teachers interact in new ways including revealing their personal sides.

For example, during an initial class session of a course, activities designed to facilitate students and instructor getting to know each other can help. Taking time to share names and occupations as well as educational and other interests is useful. Or, teachers and students might describe why they decided to major in the field and the significant events in their lives that facilitated that decision. Finally, in courses in which personal experiences are explicitly part of the content, teachers and students can reflect on significant events that altered their lives in some way.

Allowing for a discussion of personal reactions to content, or the value implications of information presented, also allows individual interests, attitudes, and beliefs to emerge. Such activities promote an increased awareness of the thoughts and feelings of teachers and students to issues. The activities also encourage mutual support and understanding, and motivate students to take risks in sharing aspects of themselves when reacting to course content. This is more likely to occur when everyone’s ideas are acknowledged in a safe environment.

Students are not the only ones who would take risks in a more personalized classroom environment. Student-centered instructional processes, for example, are more likely to encourage such things than are traditional instructor-centered teaching strategies. Thus some teachers may have to take risks to learn and use what are for them new teaching processes.
The data also indicated that three types of partnerships were formed in the classroom: student-to-student, student-to-instructor, and instructor-to-student. The three exist at the same time in a course, and as the thematic analysis showed, they possess similarities in interests as well as differences. Students were more interested in building alliances with other students than they were with teachers. The latter may reflect a lack of experience in doing so. Or, it might reflect a preference to interact with those who are similar in age, education, life experiences, and interests. Such motivations, however, can work to the advantage of teachers wanting to explore cooperative and student-centered instructional strategies. Students appear to be naturally predisposed to engage in such teaching strategies given their interests in working with each other.

Within the three alliances, we found that students and instructors can learn to perceive each other as contributing, mentoring, and resourceful individuals who empower each other. This was particularly true when instructional strategies encouraged work and dialogue within and across the three groups. In effect, student become empowered to achieve at a higher lever and become confident learners. Teaching then has a more personal focus.

Key words: personalizing teaching, collaboration, faculty-student relationships

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