

TEACHING: A PROFESSION OF RELATIONSHIPS



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“Educating means liberating an individual’s capacities rather than verifying and quantifying the academic concepts he has assimilated.”

– Ferguson, 1981

Teachers wield extensive power and share great responsibility. Therefore, “[...] when we speak of influence on student development, the teacher is by far the leading agent. In fact, the teacher-student relationship extends and sometimes surpasses the parent-child relationship, since it is through activities introduced by the teacher that students discover their thinking processes, access structured learning and build the foundations of their own destiny.” (Aylwin, 1997)

In the field of human relationships, in a climate that is open and non-evaluative, where people feel accepted and appreciated rather than judged by their actions, the tendencies for self-actualization and the development of motivation can express themselves more easily and naturally. (Charbonneau, 1982)

▶ A PROFESSION OF RELATIONSHIPS

It is a widely known fact that many teachers choose teaching because of a profound desire to share their passion in classroom interventions, the place where learning and educational relationships play out.

Given the current educational context marked by educational reform, teachers are increasingly called upon to invest time and energy outside the classroom, in situations that do not involve students. For example, they are asked to participate in the development or evaluation of study programs. This brings about a readjustment of their role regarding students, along with the place, importance and types of relationship they have with them.

It seems that, even though novel educational practices currently abound and our knowledge of the “mechanics” and components of learning is greatly refined, the educational relationship remains at the heart of the teacher’s professional identity and plays a major role in how teachers view themselves in their profession.

▶ THE RELATIONSHIP: A FERTILE GROUND FOR LEARNING AND SELF-ACTUALIZATION

The sixties and seventies marked the beginning of the educational relationship, the passage from behaviorist and empirical views to a more humanist approach. The Pygmalion effect is a strong symbol of this. Research on the subject by Rosenthal et Jacobson (1968) demonstrates that the teacher’s prejudices have a determining effect on student behaviour. Potvin et Rousseau add:

[...] when teachers have high expectations for students, the latter have a greater chance of learning because they are more likely than other students to have educational interactions with the teacher; they tend to answer more questions in class, receive more feedback on their answers and are given more reinforcement on their school performance. However, when teachers have low expectations for students, the latter are often ignored.

This and other studies have had a profound effect on the world of education. Inspired by Rogers (1976) and Neil (1970), the entire school system adopted the mission of implementing conditions conducive to the complete development of individuals, meaning the acquisition of knowledge and know-how were longer the only goals of education.

Within the humanist movement, the open-minded teacher is encouraged to develop a relationship with students that provides support and empathy and allows them to become active citizens and to evolve on the “path of self-actualization”. The Parent Reform and alternative schools are the results of this paradigm.

More recently in Québec, researchers and teachers have also underlined the importance of the educational relationship in the student’s¹ learning progress. In 1995, the Conseil supérieur de l’éducation stated that the “teacher-student relationship was the most determining factor in the quest for understanding and autonomy. Students need to get in touch with the person behind the persona of the teacher. They need to feel they are being treated as equals.”

¹ Bégin et Caouette, 1989; Richer, 1989; Grand’Maison, 1992; Barbeau, Montini et Roy, 1997; Kubanek et Waller, 1995; Langevin, 1996; Pruneau, 2002; Potvin, 2005.



A consensus was reached among educators that the quality of the relationship between teachers and students has a serious impact on the affective and cognitive development of students, at elementary and secondary levels and also in college and university. A study by Kubanet et Waller (1994) demonstrated that individual contact and encouragement by teachers promote student learning and academic perseverance, whereas a distant and impersonal teacher is linked to academic failure and program changes, regardless of student age group. More specifically for colleges, the Conseil supérieur de l'éducation (1995) collected student comments on the importance of the educational relationship and related attitudes. Results show that when it comes to teachers, students are looking for the following:

- availability outside the class, especially for more personal contact: group discussions, confidences, compliments, support, empathy;
- respect and a certain humility: To guide rather than control; the ability to recognize their own errors; to listen and show interest in what students have to say, think and do; to recognize that teachers can learn from students;
- teaching founded on solid bases, methods and tools, not only on grades;
- an interactive pedagogy: questions, taking into account student's point of view, knowledge and experiences;
- teachers who use a different approach by putting themselves in the place of the student, breaking away from the text and using examples to enrich it, drawing links between theory and practice, and connecting prior knowledge, other courses;
- teaching that falls within the framework of concrete projects;
- teachers who allow for errors, who provide rich and relevant feedback and share a sense of pride in the student's success;
- rigorous and demanding teachers, who identify objectives and structure the course in a systematic manner, who are up to date with regard to content: Teachers who are demanding of their students while providing reasonable limits, pressure and clear directives;
- teachers capable of creating an atmosphere of confidence, complicity and negotiation;
- teachers who display interest, pride, and enthusiasm for teaching.

According to Langevin (1996), the relationship between teacher and students can be established on the basis of a learning framework. The author talks about the importance of an emphatic and cooperative relationship, oriented towards the resolution of cognitive, affective, and practical problems. The teacher must give importance to the teaching of attitudes and principles of life. Whether this is conscious or not, intentional or not, teachers inevitably become role models through their verbal and non-verbal communication, their strategies for problem resolution and learning as well as their pedagogic flexibility.

Several factors affect the establishment of this educational relationship. We will discuss two of them: The beliefs and biases of the teacher and student as well as their relational history. We will then illustrate the importance of investing in relationships based on human motivations.

▶ A RELATIONSHIP SOMETIMES TAINTED BY BELIEFS AND BIASES

As mentioned earlier, research in psychology established a link long ago between the beliefs and attitudes of teachers and the academic perseverance of students. Research done by Potvin and his collaborators (2005) confirm this abundantly. It is their expressed hope that teachers take the time to question their relationships with, and attitudes towards, students experiencing problems in school.

In this same spirit, Aylwin (1997) illustrates some current beliefs that risk changing the teacher-student relationship in a clear yet somewhat caricatured fashion. The following attitudes can spark interesting discussions:

SCHOLASTIC FAILURES ARE INEVITABLE since college studies require an intellectual capacity that some students simply do not possess. So, teaching some of them is a waste of time.

MOST STUDENTS ARE NOT SPONTANEOUSLY AND DEEPLY ENGAGED IN THEIR STUDIES. Therefore, students are motivated mostly by grades and not the teacher's relationship with them.

EVERYTHING LISTED IN THE PROGRAM MUST BE TAUGHT. Given that the program is heavily loaded, it is preferable to limit the use of active approaches that are time-consuming, and favour lectures instead in order to cover all the material.

COURSE CONTENT CAN BE COVERED EFFECTIVELY. Some teachers believe that what is presented in a clear, orderly, and precise manner will be reproduced in the student's brain in the same clear, orderly, and precise manner, without the need for a relationship between the two.



With these underlying beliefs, a teacher will probably not be fully inclined to invest completely and effectively in the educational relationship, not having recognized the potentially significant impact on motivation and learning. According to Aylwin (1997), this is a prevailing situation. He maintains that these beliefs transform some teachers into phantom teachers “who would prefer to dispense this training in some kind of magical location”, without investing in the educational relationship.

Of course, beliefs that hamper the educational relationship are not exclusive to teachers. There are many students with persistent prejudices regarding teachers and learning that can also hinder the establishment of the educational relationship:

PREJUDICES WITH REGARD TO TEACHERS.

Teachers try to trap students; they want to “purge” the classroom; they are not really interested and much too demanding;

ATTRIBUTED PERCEPTIONS.

The student does not believe he has the competencies to succeed, that he is intelligent enough or has any control over his academic performance.

For his part, Barbeau (1993) provides a complete inventory of determinants and indicators of students’ cognitive commitment. He puts into perspective the effect of students’ conceptions of school and intelligence on one hand, and, on the other, the impact of their perceived successes or failures. Therefore, attitudes such as “What is there to study?”, “This discussion is a waste of time...” and “What is important is getting a passing grade...” do not promote student commitment to learning or the educational relationship.

To summarize, it is important to remember that teachers, despite all good intentions, come up against student resistance as well as their own resistance... Certain students and teachers have problems developing a relationship. Can we assume that this resistance is, in some cases, a result of their own history of relationships?

THE RELATIONAL HISTORY OF TEACHERS AND STUDENTS

A person is never neutral in a relationship. Teachers, with their prejudices and beliefs regarding students (and human beings in general), with their “relational history”, whether they are conscious of it or not, favour or hinder the establishment of a connection with their students. The student, freshly imprinted with relationships to authority figures (parents and teachers), is extremely sensitive to how teachers view him and reacts to this on the basis of his own history. According to Pruneau (2002), it is difficult to explore the educational relationship without shedding light on the overall relationships that make up the teacher’s personal history as well as that of the student.

Psychoanalysis brings to light some of the processes in question by identifying the notion of transference that permeates all relationships whether we like it or not. Freud put forth the idea many years ago “that we transfer onto teachers, the respect and hopes inspired by the omniscient father figure of our childhood, and we begin treating them like we treated our father at home”.

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Richard (1989) brings out the narcissistic aspects of the educational relationship and underlines the fact that students sometimes tend:

- To seek the teacher’s affection by acting as though they need assistance in order to obtain help and become an object of the teacher’s concern;
- To identify with and idealize the teacher (finding similar or attractive traits) in the hope of becoming more like him;
- To deny this idealization with condescending attitudes, exaggerated demands or scornful criticism;
- To go from dependence to disillusionment (when confronted to the teacher’s weaknesses).

Teachers also have emotional scars and live with insecurities. They can:

- feel intimidated because they want to be acknowledged and accepted by their colleagues and students, they hope to build themselves up by helping the student become the ideal student they were not;
- work at having students like them so the students are spared certain frustrations that are nevertheless required for giving birth to their own ideas;



- feel anxiety based on the memory of their own ambivalence towards their teachers (fear of “an eye for an eye” i.e., that others will do to them what they once did to others) and their own idealized expectations (fear of disappointing the audience);
- make the student a narcissistic object, a mirror used to showcase their knowledge and a reflection of their value as teachers. If the student is gifted and docile, the relationship will be pleasant; however, if the student proves disappointing, contrary or overly critical the latter will be rejected;
- refuse to be idealized by the student (because it makes them nervous) and thus oppose one of the driving forces in the learning process, rejecting the student’s desire to grow and to become more like the teacher.

According to Langevin (1996), whether we like it or not, some students often bring a past filled with “indifference towards teachers²”, the teacher must be in a position to receive “the full impact of their critical spirit”, a step that is sometimes necessary to awaken their interest and curiosity. However, “teachers are not expected to become therapists for their students”. (Pruneau, 2002)

Obviously, many teachers feel uneasy or insecure at the thought of having a more personal contact with the student. For them, getting closer to the student means a departure from their teaching mandate (Boutet, 2002). However, as Pruneau (2002) reminds us, “given that pedagogy necessarily implies a relationship, it is obvious that the transmission of objective course information should not prevent us from paying particular attention to the subjective relationship”.

ESTABLISHING MEANINGFUL RELATIONSHIPS BASED ON HUMAN MOTIVATIONS

The humanist theory, with its focus on accomplished and happy individuals, has produced a detailed inventory of the needs and motivations of all human beings. It identifies a range of fundamental aspirations that most people share, which apply to both teachers and students.

(M. James et J. James, 1993; Maslow, 1972). These can be used to nourish the educational relationship. Therefore, if teachers are sensitive to the profoundly human needs of their students, they will keep these in mind while establishing meaningful relationships with them and when reacting to the students’ outward expressions. Let us review the inventory of fundamental desires put forth by the humanist theory:

THE DESIRE TO BE FREE: *To decide for oneself.*

(IF REPRESSED: *agitation and revolt*)

THE DESIRE TO UNDERSTAND: *To be well informed and to make judicious decisions.*

(IF REPRESSED: *frustration and confusion*)

THE DESIRE TO CREATE: *To express one’s originality in work or hobbies.*

(IF REPRESSED: *indifference, despair and irritability*)

THE DESIRE TO HAVE FUN: *To be happy, approach things with humour and optimism.*

(IF REPRESSED: *chronic fatigue and disillusionment*)

THE DESIRE TO CREATE BONDS: *To be loving and establish authentic, open and honest relationships.*

(IF REPRESSED: *feelings of alienation and loss of faith in others*)

THE DESIRE TO TRANSCEND: *To seek to exceed one’s limitations and go beyond what others have done.*

(IF REPRESSED: *fear and scepticism*)

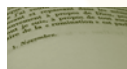
According to Maslow, when a person cannot satisfy his needs or fundamental aspirations then sickness, anxiety and depression appear. The fact of neglecting one’s fundamental aspirations will affect the quality of interactions with others, interfere with the educational relationship and can promote or hamper student progress.

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THE DESIRE TO LIVE: *To realize projects and master one’s personal environment.*

(IF REPRESSED: *lethargy and despair*)

² According to Richard (1989) students need, above all else, the presence of someone they value who does not think for them (does not fill this void), someone who is interested in their learning progress. In the best scenario, if the teacher has been able to overcome his previous conflicts, he will value the student’s efforts, guide him with useful comments and information, will refrain from making remarks that could be taken as “narcissistic castration” and will share empathically in the joy of his success.



According to the humanist approach, a human being can choose to express his aspirations in a sterile or destructive manner and thus experience exhaustion at work. He can, become close minded to the ideas of colleagues, miss out on interesting experiences, perform desperate actions that make others avoid him, and become isolated or stifle his own judgement to follow that of others instead. On the other hand, a person can choose to express his aspirations in a productive manner by setting aside time for meditation, by taking care of his health, freeing himself from interior conflicts, opening up to the world, by trying to learn more about himself; by making the most of his potential, talent and interests and by discovering the excitement of learning, the challenge of creativity and the joy of authentic relationships!

Although the teacher is not the only one responsible for the dynamics of the relationship, he does have an important role to play even if only through his integrity and emotional availability.

In short, both teacher and student are on the same quest even though they have not completely eliminated the obstacles that litter their path. Although the teacher is not the only one responsible for the dynamics of the relationship, he does have an important role to play even if only through his integrity and emotional availability. He is not only a specialist in his field but primarily a human being, whose main working tool is the stuff he is made of: his personality, aspirations, teaching concepts, unresolved emotional conflicts, interests, passions etc.

According to Caouette (1998), the teacher has a “mission and a professional and social responsibility to educate

human beings to be: free and responsible, capable of learning, understanding, creating and meditating, capable of working together, of cooperation and interdependence; beings that are healthy physically, mentally and spiritually; and, beings who want to contribute in a positive way to the realization of a collective social project”. In this perspective, teachers have a responsibility to maintain a healthy attitude toward themselves while being as relaxed and available as possible, in keeping with their values and profound aspirations, conscious of the fact that their daily interventions may have a greater impact than anticipated, and sometimes even contribute to collective development and change. From this point of view, their daily dealings with students take on a whole new meaning, calling for increased awareness and coherence.

MAINTAINING THE RELATIONSHIP

Langevin (1996) proposes a few very accessible ways to create an atmosphere that promotes commitment and learning. Ideally, teachers should:

- show empathy, adopt a cooperative relationship geared to resolving cognitive, affective and practical problems;
- be aware of their own non verbal messages and contradictions, practice listening and decoding non verbal communication;
- check student comprehension and adapt their practices to better communicate with them;
- show empathy when students become anxious, initiate contact with each student, plan individual or sub-group meetings or activities in the first courses to guide or coach the student in an assignment, make an effort to learn the student’s name;
- use open ended techniques in class: ask questions, underline progress and in addition to office meetings previously mentioned, reserve ten minutes for helping students at the beginning and at the end of class, emphasize periods of availability, give students verbal support during class and written encouragement on marked assignments;
- generate student feedback on the course and course activities;
- give students regular feedback with constructive comments, avoid laying blame, reassuring, judging or questioning them because such attitudes may prevent the development of student autonomy;
- call into question one’s own practices, vary teaching methods and make class activities more meaningful;
- promote bonds between students: get students to teach part of the subject matter themselves, develop a telephone network, organize a support network amongst themselves, promote the learning of classmates’ names, teamwork, cooperation and concrete projects;
- position errors as opportunities to progress, solicit questions.

Developing an educational relationship and teaching disciplinary content are not in opposition. On the contrary, students usually appreciate a pedagogic framework that is rigorous but flexible, where relationship is of prime importance, where there is



respect and pride in work well done. In the end, to establish an authentic educational relationship teachers must assume some of their role of educator, accept there is room for improvement, work on being more receptive, humble and as fair as possible, while considering their errors and even their faults as being necessary to the development of their students.

▶ A SCHOOL WHERE THE EDUCATIONAL RELATIONSHIP COMES FIRST

Given the complexity of the profession and the current prevailing values in the world of education, some say that it would be utopic to imagine an institution with authentic teachers totally committed to the student relationship. According to Caouette (1997), school “continues to lag behind the business world and the values it conveys”. Petrella (2000) goes even further by mentioning that this situation results in part from the fact that our leaders are obsessed with technology and seek, above all, to train a qualified work force. Being under the distinct impression that a pedagogic vision modeled on the business world has been imposed on them, many teachers are calling for a school where human relationships remain a prime component. According to some critics, in the current context where humanist principles have disappeared from the educational landscape in favour of a more pragmatic and utilitarian approach, it seems essential to create conditions that give meaning to student work, fuel the passion that drives them and therefore, continue to inspire commitment and innovation.

As we have seen, developing a fertile educational relationship can be more complex than it seems and presents many obstacles. This relationship remains nonetheless fundamental: Students develop better when they are in contact with open, responsive and coherent adults. However the teacher's attitude cannot by itself account for all the difficulties experienced by students. It is however realistic to believe that teachers' behaviour has a real impact on the overall system in which they intervene. Finally, it is important to remember that for many students, all opportunities for educational relationships are important, even crucial. Students have a real need to feel this human connection with the teacher. ▶

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