# Relational Learning: Creating a “working alliance” in the classroom

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## Introduction

Developing social relationships within a classroom can have wide-reaching effects on the classroom environment. Rather than establishing the classroom as a dynamic based on power, the instructor’s role in the classroom is redefined as a trusted guide through relational learning. Instructors can form meaningful bonds and create a climate conducive to learning when they form working alliances with their students (Meyers, 2008). Relational learning, also known as a “working alliance,” relies on strong relationships between educators and their students and establishing rapport in the classroom. Classroom rapport is positively correlated to students’ attention, attendance, and professor satisfaction with the course (Benson et al., 2005). By establishing these relationships, students are motivated, engaged, and actively participating in their learning. This can be critical in preventing and/or reducing the likelihood of academic failure. The focus of this chapter is to highlight the importance of relationships in the classroom and strategies that could be used in developing working alliances with students.

## Learning Objectives

By the end of the chapter readers will be able to:

* Describe what relational learning is and how it can benefit their classroom.
* Identify strategies/methods to apply relational learning in the classroom.

The day has finally arrived; it’s the first day of classes. You make your way into the classroom, noticing a couple of students were also early and look as nervous as you do. As it gets closer to the start of class, more students mill into the classroom. You try to start to converse with some students as you try to get comfortable. Finally, it’s time for class to begin. All eyes focus on you as you start to speak and introduce yourself as the course instructor. This is your first time teaching a course, which can be daunting, especially for new faculty/instructors who may not have had previous experience teaching.

The focus of this chapter will highlight the importance of relationships with students in the classroom as a teaching strategy. We will discuss the following:

* Why are relationships in the classroom important?
* What is relational learning?
* What are some strategies to implement or reinforce relational learning in the classroom?

### Why it matters

Developing positive instructor-student relationships in the classroom has many wide-reaching effects on the classroom environment, such as supporting students’ adjustment to school, promoting academic performance, and fostering students’ resiliency in academic performance. Rather than establishing the classroom based on power and control, the instructor establishes their role in the classroom as a trusted guide. Working together, the instructor and students accomplish the learning objectives of the course. Students become motivated, engaged, and actively participating in their learning by developing these relationships. This is critical in preventing and/or reducing the likelihood of academic failure and creating a fun learning environment.

## Heading 2

Relational learning, also known as a “working alliance,” relies on strong relationships between instructors/students and establishing rapport or a connection in the classroom (Roger, 2009). The concept of a working alliance is rooted in psychotherapy research and theory. However, the concept applies to the college classroom as an individual (student) seeking change and another individual (instructor) serving as the agent of change (Rogers, 2009). In a survey, undergraduates were asked to identify characteristics and behaviors inherent in effective teaching. It was reported that 42% of the students ranked within the top 10 qualities of effective teaching. However, when faculty members were given the same survey, only 7% of the faculty listed the same quality in their top 10 (Buskist et al., 2002). Rapport in the classroom has been positively correlated to students’ attention, attendance, and satisfaction of the professor and course (Benson et al., 2005; Meyers, 2008). In early childhood education, students in math classrooms with more positive teacher-student relationships reported an increased engagement in mathematical learning and were more willing to help their peers learn new concepts (Rimm-Kaufman et al., 2015). Relational learning needs to be used in combination with other techniques and pedagogy. As a result, it keeps students motivated and engaged in purposeful work.

Keep in mind that relational learning does not mean that the instructor should be friends with their students but rather that the instructor should have a respectful and supportive relationship with their students. Do not create a persona that you think your students would find enjoyable or likable. Be your authentic self! Your student will respect you more for it. In the classroom, use language that is inclusive and respectful. Be mindful of your students and the experiences they might be going through when you see students struggling in your course. Relational learning is about the tone you set for the classroom.

Applying relational learning in the classroom does not need to feel like extra work or as if it is required. This forced application of relational learning appears unauthentic and has the reverse effect in the classroom. As an instructor, one should ask themselves: How they would like to use relational learning in their classroom? What is the outcome expected for using relational learning in the classroom? How much effort and time will they dedicate to relational learning? Don’t be afraid to challenge yourself but keep in mind not to overwhelm yourself.

Establishing positive and constructive relationships that foster relationship learning is challenging in the large classroom. This will require some creativity and patience on your part (Tanner, 2011). The following suggestions are to be applied to your classroom to foster relational learning; however, do not limit yourself. As the instructor, you will have a better idea of your classroom and how you would like your classroom to function. I challenge you to be creative and step out of your comfort zone to apply relational learning in your classrooms.

The first day of classes is essential in establishing a relationship between the instructor and students. It is their first interaction. On the first day of class, the instructor generally gives an overview of the course, goes over the syllabus, and perhaps goes into some of the course material. This is important as it sets the course’s expectations and gives students an idea of what the course will be throughout the semester. However, this possibly is not the ideal setup for relational learning. Something as simple as telling your students a little bit about yourself on that first day, i.e., where you came from, educational background, hobbies, pets, etc., helps your students relate and feel more comfortable with you. One semester, I co-taught at a land-grant university. The class was Introduction to Animal Science 1464. I introduced myself and made myself relatable with them. I explained that I was once in their position. I was a student in the same classroom, possibly sitting in the same seats with the same professor. I would then transition into where I was from, and most of the students were in-state; the likelihood of meeting a student from the area I was from was highly probable. I recall on one occasion, one of the students that I was teaching that semester happened to be from my hometown and went to the same high school as me. Often, this student would come to me for questions, help with particular assignments, or just friendly conversation. The more relatable I was to them, the easier it was for the students to come to me with questions and concerns with that class. The familiarity often puts them at ease, and they are willing to reach out to the instructor.

Having students complete a simple survey about themselves before the first day of classes serves as a fun speaking topic during the course’s first day. Questions such as: Are you in-state or out-of-state? Where are you from? What year are you? Future career goals? Why are you taking this course? What are you hoping to learn from the course? The survey results will then give you, the instructor, a better idea of the class characteristics. In addition, because you asked about the students’ perceptions of the class and their learning objectives, you are better positioned to know the students’ expectations about the course. During the first day of the course, the results need to be presented in a simple graph or table to give students a better idea about their peers. The instructor needs to use the results as a function for class discussion or as a Question and Answer segment to answer any questions about the course. This exercise aims to get a better understanding of the students in the course and help develop an open learning environment in which students would feel comfortable speaking with their instructor.

A syllabus is also an essential tool in establishing a relationship between an instructor and their students. It provides students with information about the course they are enrolled in. It provides them with important dates and deadlines, contact information for the instructor, and an agreement between the instructor and the students. Nothing sours a relationship faster than a syllabus that is not followed either by the instructor or the student(s). Ensure the office hours detailed in your syllabus are set times when you will be available in your office. Try your best to stay within your set date and deadlines. Unpredictable circumstances occur from time to time, but make sure to communicate with your students if any changes arise.

Learning your students’ names helps develop positive relationships between instructor and students (Tanner, 2011). Although it’s a simple concept, learning a student’s name makes the students feel a personal connection with their instructor, which is beneficial in developing your classroom’s learning environment. This is a bit more challenging in larger classrooms but can be accomplished with some practice. Having students bring in a large index card with their name or make a name tent (a piece of paper folded in half with the name written on one side that is perched in front of the student) is the simplest way to learn your students’ names (Tanner, 2013). Whenever a student has a question, they will raise their hand, and before you call on them to answer the question, look at the name on the name tent. Another simple way to learn students’ names is to ask them to say their names before asking their questions. In smaller classes, you can make personal requirements for students to come to your office during office hours the first week of classes for a quick 5-10-minute meeting to get to know each student. As the semester progresses, this strategy needs to shift to discuss their progress in the course and receive feedback on the course. Over time, these strategies will help you learn and remember your students’ names and build instructor-student relationships.

Another simple strategy to foster positive instructor-student relationships is for the instructor to come to class early. This dependence on the instructor’s schedule opens classroom availability and classroom visibility. Being present 15-20 minutes before the start of the class gives the instructor some time to interact and converse with students or answer questions students may have. These interactions or conversations focus on the course material. Generally, the interactions or conversations focus on topics outside the classroom, especially as the semester progresses and students become more comfortable with the instructor. The instructor’s facial and body language are also crucial in students feeling comfortable approaching the instructor, so remember to make yourself approachable.

Teaching assistants (undergraduate and graduate), if available to the instructor, play an important role in relational learning. A former teaching mentor described graduate and undergraduate teaching assistants (TAs) as ambassadors to the classroom. Undergraduate TAs are generally within the same age range as the students in your classroom and are peers to your students. In some cases, Graduate TAs might be the only instructor students interact with. It is important to have them involved in implementing relational learning in the classroom. This will further reinforce the environment you are trying to create in the classroom. Teaching assistants can be a great resource that may pick up on issues you may not be aware of.

The strategies described in this chapter can be applied to a large classroom and any classroom of any size. Relational learning can be modified to fit the instructor’s needs to implement it in the classroom and the resources available. Establishing the foundation for relational learning at the beginning of the semester is essential in keeping that learning environment throughout the semester. Once that foundation has been set, it is easy to keep it going. Do not be discouraged if a strategy for incorporating relational learning in the classroom does not work or does not have the desired outcome. It requires some trial and error, along with patience. Also, you will find that every classroom has its different personality. What works for one may not work for another one. Modify your approach as needed, and don’t be discouraged. When relational learning is effectively applied in the classroom, the results are a lot of fun. The learning environment is very enjoyable not only for the students but also for the instructor. Students invest more in the course, playing a larger role in their learning and collaborating with the instructor to achieve their course goals. Relational learning is beneficial for the learning environment for your classroom and the students, as they become more active in their own education as they progress through college.

## Reflective Questions

What worries you about relational learning in the classroom?

How are my current communication skills and how can I improve them?

What are some easy ways you can apply relational learning in the classroom?

### Diversity

Relational learning fosters a fun learning environment by creating a respectful and supportive relationship between the instructor and students. This environment can be further developed to include diversity and inclusion, but it is up to the instructor to determine how to incorporate this. Using inclusive language can be an easy way to incorporate inclusion in the classroom. Allowing different viewpoints on the topic can help everyone feel like they are being heard and have a voice in the classroom. Be sure to remind everyone to be respectful, especially when they might not agree with someone else’s viewpoint. The college classroom itself can be diverse. It might be made up of students from around the country and sometimes around the world. Many of the students may not know each other and normally wouldn’t interact with each other, except that they are attending college. With relational learning, the instructor can create situations where these diverse groups of students can work together, communicate, and learn from each other (Westfall-Rudd et al., 2019). Assigning student groups to be diverse can also aid in further exposing students to different ideas and viewpoints.

### Syllabus Development

The syllabus plays a vital role in relational learning as it lays out the students’ expectations of taking the course. As an instructor plans out their syllabus, they should be as clear as possible to what they would the course to be. The syllabus establishes the rules of the course and should be used as a reference by students. Typically, a syllabus has the instructor’s contact information, required materials for the course, a tentative schedule for the course, and resources available to students. This gives students an idea of what to expect from the course and the instructor. The language used in the syllabus can set the tone of the course, so in the syllabus, use language that is deliberate and gets the point across but not punitive. Students should feel like they can contact the instructor if they have questions and not fear being scolded.

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