

WHO CARES?

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE TEACHER–STUDENT RELATIONSHIP

Seven years ago, I was asked to design a course specifically for college students at risk of dropping out. Fine-tuning it over time, I planned a number of activities and organized experiences while ensuring that content focused on the fundamental aptitudes to be developed. To help my students “re-engage”, I relied heavily on my background in counselling and the experience I had acquired in teaching at the elementary and secondary levels. I eventually asked my students to give me their opinions on my teaching, as well as to evaluate the impact of my instructional strategies on their motivation. To my considerable surprise, they felt their relationship with me was the most salient factor in helping them “stick with” my courses. This made me realize that, even at the CÉGEP level, a caring attitude might be pivotal in enabling at-risk students to stay the course and complete their education.

I decided to explore the matter further and undertake some preliminary research as part of my doctoral research. My goals were to identify the types of relationships that exist between instructor and student, and to determine which approaches and strategies produce the best outcomes, especially as regards at-risk students. I conducted interviews with two CÉGEP teachers, organizing the transcribed texts into categories and then into broader themes reflecting the role faculty can play in educating and assisting struggling students. My findings spotlighted the ways college teachers can demonstrate caring and establish significant, productive relationships with students in order to promote their success.

In this article, I will review the literature on the interpersonal relationships postsecondary instructors can establish with their students (this step will help put the aspects emerging from my research into perspective). I will conclude with a summary that discusses the strategies educators can use to establish a quality relationship with struggling students, in order to encourage them and help them succeed.

▶ THE TEACHER-STUDENT RELATIONSHIP AND ACADEMIC SUCCESS

According to Suldo et al. (2014), a number of studies emphasize the importance of the teacher-student relationship to



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academic achievement. Those works include a synthesis of research conducted over the past ten years by Anderman and Kaplan (2008), who, although noting obvious theoretical variations, observed a certain degree of consensus through cross-checking. In their view, specialists generally agree that students who have a good rapport with their teachers are better motivated, get higher grades, are more engaged, and feel a greater sense of well-being.

Other studies also have proven that, at the post-secondary level, establishing a connection with students can greatly enhance success. Cox (2009), for example, who conducted a semester-long study of students in a university English course, showed that those who experienced a fear of failure can undermine their own goals. She also found that educators who understand their students' feelings and take an interest in their needs are more likely to talk to them, assuage their fears, and help them continue with their studies, which has positive effects on academic outcomes. This would suggest that the teacher-student relationship is of paramount importance.

Deil-Amen (2011) conducted a qualitative study involving 238 students, staff, and teachers from seven community colleges. The findings of this study, which was aimed at measuring participants' feelings about social and academic integration, prove that teachers' support and approachability, as well as the quality of their relationship with students, are fundamental to students' successful integration into college.

As the upshot of these different studies is that the teacher-student relationship has positive outcomes at all levels, it is not surprising that Roy (2012) strongly recommends making this relationship the focus of measures designed to promote academic success. Students' engagement and proper integration into post-secondary education (Deil-Amen 2011); persistence in studies and academic performance (Cox 2009); and sense of well-being and positive perceptions of their school (Suldo et al. 2013) are all vital, as they facilitate perseverance to graduation. Naturally, where students are at risk of dropping out, these factors become even more important.

Furthermore, concern demonstrated by faculty appears to be the main characteristic of a strong, quality teacher-student relationship. In this regard, Noddings (1992) qualifies educators as “carers”, maintaining that they must be kind and attentive to students' needs while helping and taking care of



them. For the relationship to be productive, faculty must also be capable of “motivational displacement”—in other words, their energy should “flow towards” the needs of their students, or the “cared-for” (Noddings 2012). In return, students are responsible for applying themselves, and, by displaying enthusiasm and an attitude of inquiry, show that caring has been received via an agreed-upon project. This response is necessary in that it makes the learning relationship effective and beneficial.

While this model is characteristic of the elementary and secondary levels in particular, I believe it can also be profitably employed by postsecondary educators. The structure of college instruction is the same as that described by Noddings, insofar as teachers and students are involved in an unequal relationship, and teachers are responsible for seeing to the best interests of their charges. As noted by Deil-Amen (2011) and Cox (2009), college teachers who are supportive, approachable, and attentive to students’ needs have a direct influence on their outcomes. Although the educators observed by both these researchers may not have been consciously aware of implementing a caring model, they nonetheless demonstrated Noddings’ construct of motivational displacement: by paying attention to their students they created a climate of trust in which students received the support they needed. With students at risk of dropping out, instructors must redouble their efforts, lending a sympathetic ear and proving they care in order to properly understand students’ needs and fears. This is the view, in particular, of Roy (2012), who believes such concern has specific positive effects. Mutual trust is especially important, as it allows such students, who often feel marginalized, to benefit from the social bond established with their teachers.

To date, only a small number of studies on caring at college have been carried out, and generally deal with student perceptions. Meyers (2009) reviewed the literature and demonstrated that college students consider interpersonal relationships with their instructors very important. At the same time, however, he notes that some faculty seem hesitant about entering a caring relationship, and often feel that caring is not part of their job. According to Meyers, many educators believe that establishing interpersonal relationships with their students is neither professional nor realistic—an attitude he finds regrettable. Convinced of the need to show teachers how to convey care, Meyers stresses the fact that supportive relationships promote learning, as suggested by Vygotsky,¹ and that paying attention to students, verbal communication, and simple eye contact or a smile can help establish a climate favourable to mutual respect, even in very large classes. He

concludes that students are sensitive to the quality of the relationships they have with faculty and that these perceptions influence their academic engagement.

ROLES EDUCATORS CAN PLAY IN INSTRUCTING AND SUPPORTING AT-RISK STUDENTS

During the course of my preliminary research, I conducted 120-minute semi-structured interviews with two social-science instructors (Fred” and “Janice”) from a public English-language CÉGEP on Montreal’s South Shore. Each had been teaching at the college for some ten years. I chose these individuals because their students described them as open and attentive to the needs expressed in the classroom.

In phase one of the data analysis, two broad themes emerged: both teachers prioritized the care of their students and recognized that the passage to early adulthood raised difficult challenges for them.

Both teachers prioritized the well-being of their students.

FRED

Fred made multiple statements throughout the interview indicating that **caring**, which was central to his teaching, could be conveyed through individual work with students.

If you don't care about your students, you're in the wrong place. 'Cause there's one of me and 44 of them, times four. If I don't care about them, I have no business...teaching them.

He also **prioritized helping students reach their potential**.

The students here are great and they have a lot of potential...sometimes they achieve that potential, sometimes they don't. I'm trying to help them achieve it. Whether it's through thinking differently, historical lessons, life lessons, or just meeting them in my office and getting to know why they're not doing well, I want to help them achieve that potential.

Fred is motivated to **teach what he considers important topics**, because it will help students prepare for the future.

I want to help them achieve.... I want them to learn; my goal is to teach important things. I...try to focus on the areas of history I feel are important, and also try to prepare them for university or to run a business, whatever I can do to help.

¹ For more information on the works of Vygotsky mentioned here, readers are encouraged to consult the article entitled “From Social Interaction to Higher Psychological Process: A Clarification and Application of Vygotsky’s Theory” (Wertsch 1979).



JANICE

Janice noted that **getting to know students individually** was central to creating relationships that enhanced her teaching and improved student outcomes.

Getting to know their names... I find it helps when I give lectures, because I know who the students are; they're not strangers. One of my favourite things ever since I started here is that, for the first week, my only homework at night is to memorize peoples' names.

In particular, when Janice works with students who might be struggling or at risk of dropping out, she is happiest when her teaching relationship **helps a student persevere**.

Maybe I'm the only person in two years who says 'hi' to them; maybe that makes a difference, I don't know. They [the students] say they're happy in my class, they look forward to it. And if they're happy, that makes me happy, because for me CÉGEP was a really boring time; I hated it. To think there was one kid who liked my class enough to look forward to it makes me ridiculously happy.

She **varies her lessons in order to best accommodate different classes**.

Every single time I teach the course, I rearrange the material in a different way and I match it to who's in front of me... I have them do something appropriate for them. If they're a talkative bunch, we do one thing; if they're quiet, we do something else. So I can match the topic, the material and how it's delivered or presented...and they love that.

Janice **makes sure to show students who are struggling that they have value** both to her and to the class.

If a student walks in late, instead of yelling at him and saying 'Where were you? This is the third day in a row!', I'll look at him and say, 'I'm happy you showed up. Please come and join us; I've already put your papers on your desk.'

Both teachers demonstrated an understanding of students' needs, taking account of their age, developmental stage, and personal struggles.

FRED

Fred considers his students' age group and **recognizes what challenges they might face**.

They're 17, they're 18, they've got all the challenges of becoming an adult—you know, driving, first girlfriend...some of them have awful family situations, they go through really hard times. They're young, and they may never have had anyone who cared about them.

He was aware that some students faced challenging circumstances and **made himself available to them for consultation**.

A lot of them come from pretty tough backgrounds; they've witnessed some negative stuff. You know, they have these bad beliefs about

themselves that are just not true. And so they've never had anyone say 'I know you know you can do it, you're smart'.

JANICE

Janice **understands that CEGEP students need stamina and effort, especially those who are struggling**.

I think a lot about learning has to do with being motivated enough to keep going. It doesn't always matter the path you take, or what exactly you learn; what counts is being motivated to actually get there and not give up.

She is **aware that student self-esteem is often attached to academic outcomes** and that the teacher's perception of these are crucial to student self-assessment.

My opinion of you isn't based on whether you attend my class or not or how well you do; I'm just happy you're here.

She **believes that all students are capable of higher achievement** and sees them as hard working.

In every single class for twenty terms, when I hand back tests, I say, 'If you failed this test, are you going to die alone in a gutter with no money and no family?' And they reply, 'No.' So I say, 'Yeah, it's not that big a deal. But whatever mark you get, whether it's 50 or 97, you're going to go home tonight and think about how you can do better.' And I actually make them take out a piece of paper and write down what they're happy with and what they want to improve, and they have to hand it in to me.

Janice **understands she can contribute to their emerging sense of self and directly transmits her positive views to them**.

I ask them, 'What were you proud of? Even if your mark is only 30 out of 100, what can you do better next time?' I tell them that, no matter what they do, if they're proud of it, I'm proud of them. And that they should always try to do better.

CHARACTERISTIC PRACTICES OF THESE CARING INSTRUCTORS

In phase two of my research, I analyzed the interview data collected and classified them into four main groups. These groups, which reflect the qualities or characteristics of the two teachers concerned, the positions they adopt, or the types of approaches they use, are as follows:

- proper class management;
- a positive attitude and role model;
- a personal interest in each student; and
- extra care and attention shown to struggling students.



■ Proper classroom management

Fred and Janice know how to manage a classroom. They tailor the environment to each class, and plan their courses to make allowances for individuals with differing needs. Their instructions are clear. They carry out activities that are inspiring and engaging, thereby making students feel welcomed, happy, and valued. Both understand the sources of students' behaviour and are firm when they are dealing with the rare behavioural disruption, but can self-regulate and use humour to diffuse such situations.

■ Positive attitude and role model

Fred and Janice love what they do and they enjoy working with people. They are professional, hard-working, and knowledgeable. They support their students by being obliging, available, reliable, stable, and approachable. They maintain a positive attitude and sincerely believe that young people have the potential to reach their goals. Fred and Janice also view their work as an opportunity to inspire and help students become responsible citizens.

■ Personal interest in each student

Both instructors are attentive. Through their words and their actions, they show an interest in their students, establishing a relationship by meeting with them and getting to know each one. They treat each student as a unique individual, an adult in the making, and know how many challenges they face. Fred and Janice are empathetic, demonstrating their understanding when interacting with their students, taking their problems into consideration, and sharing their pride in their accomplishments.

■ Extra care and attention shown to struggling students

Fred and Janice are both caring teachers. Their students feel understood, valued, supported, and better able to deal with their issues. They feel accepted for who they are, regardless of their academic standing. With the help of their teacher, they see themselves as capable, responsible citizens with a potential for success. Because of these teachers, they want to attend classes.

▶ EFFECTIVE STRATEGIES FOR ESTABLISHING A QUALITY RELATIONSHIP WITH AT-RISK STUDENTS

We can now establish a number of links between my findings and the various theories on the interaction between educators and college students at risk of dropping out.

First, both teachers I interviewed displayed the considerate attitude that Noddings (1992) recommended faculty adopt. This author, as we have seen, insists on the fact that teaching is, above all, a caring relationship, and that educators should ideally meet the needs of their students, even if this means bypassing curriculum requirements. There is no doubt that Fred and Janice use this method in order to motivate their at-risk students: rather than staying within the strict boundaries imposed by their respective programs or implementing them too narrowly in class, they make it a priority to deal with various problems and crises, so as to help their students overcome obstacles.

...students are sensitive to the quality of the relationships they have with faculty and...these perceptions influence their academic engagement.

The two participants are also open and altruistic. They self-regulate, temper their ideas and emotions, and confidently size up the classroom atmosphere. They have designed courses aimed at optimizing each student's academic performance, while demonstrating considerable flexibility regarding students' problems and constantly seeking to enhance their motivation and desire to succeed. Accordingly, they take the personal needs of every individual into account. Fred and Janice are also empathetic toward students, and ethically provide support in order to help their students take full advantage of their abilities. They facilitate positive outcomes by establishing relationships that testify to a true desire to help, as well as by providing everyone with assistance and putting a premium on cooperation, communication, and respect. Both also creatively manage their classes while focusing on the individual needs of each student. Overall, Fred and Janice count on the quality of their relationships with their students. Whether they are interacting with them or planning courses, these instructors are concerned with everybody in their classes. They sincerely care for their charges and want to steer them toward academic success.

As illustrated by this example, establishing positive, empathetic relationships with college students, especially those in danger of dropping out or are struggling, can make all the difference when the time comes to promote persistence and prevent dropping out. According to Meyers (2002), developing a caring, sharing attitude should be a "must" for college faculty. As he states in his article, it is important to remind teachers who doubt the validity of these values that a caring approach produces good results, even at the college level. ◀



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Both the English- and French-language versions of this article have been published on the AQPC website with the financial support of the Quebec-Canada Entente for Minority Language Education.