ESTABLISHING A RELATIONSHIP WITH DISTANCE LEARNERS: CAN IT BE DONE?

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In its latest call for articles, *Pédagogie collégiale* decided to spotlight the teacher-student relationship (TSR), in particular the benefits and challenges involved. In a distance-learning context, where, by definition, teaching and learning are isolated, what types of teacher-student relationships exist? What impact can such relationships have on education?

In this article, we will attempt to explore the particular features of the teacher-student relationship in an asynchronous distance-learning context,[1] examining that relationship from a theoretical perspective, how it is manifested, and the implicit causal link that frequently exists between the TSR and academic success.

FROM TRIANGLE TO TETRAHEDRON

Before the teacher-student relationship is discussed, it should be redefined as part of a theoretical framework—in the case at hand, Houssaye's model of the "pedagogical triangle" (1988).

This article will examine the teacher-student relationship, which, according to Houssaye, is based on the training process (see Figure 1). Education has long been studied solely from the viewpoint of the instructor; the TSR has been the focus of research for only a short time. In works on education, the issue of the discipline involved—i.e., the subject matter taught—has existed in and for itself, with the accent on the message (and the messenger), to the disadvantage of the recipient.

According to Vallet, if we examine the term's etymology, a "pedagogue", in ancient times, was a slave in charge of taking children from home to school, as well as supervising their play and conversation. While neither an educator nor a teacher, the pedagogue accompanied and protected his charges (Vallet 1999); only much later would that function change. It was not until writings by Rousseau—in particular *Émile, or On Education,* which was published toward the end of the 18th century—that the teacher-student relationship gained the status it now enjoys. This treatise focuses on the title character's personal journey from birth to affairs of the heart; it opened the door for works by Pestalozzi[2] and Freinet,[3] among others, who have made similar contributions.

How is all this related to distance learning? Well, our brief historical "detour" actually serves a purpose! The arrival of new technology has modified the shape of the triangle constituted by the relationships between the teacher, the learner, and knowledge; in other words, a fourth element—the media—has been added. Whether paper or digital, the tools and technology used in distance learning have an effect on instruction; without these resources, in fact, distance learning would never have seen the light of day. It is precisely via technology that teaching and learning can work together in such an environment: on the basis of this observation, as well as the reflections of other authors, Jelmam (2011) identified certain variations on Houssaye's triangle.

Faerber (2002) was one of the first to challenge the shape of that polygon; he suggested adding a fourth aspect, thereby transforming the triangle into a tetrahedron (see Figure 2). This addition, which represents the "class", reflects the geographic dispersal of "distance learners" and their interactions with one another and with the instructor. In the wake of this challenge, Lombard (2007) also added another side to Houssaye's triangle (see Figure 3), which he refers to as the "cyber-teacher mechanism". This figure is designed to provide a better understanding and analysis of distance-education interaction—i.e., that taking place between teacher, student, and knowledge and the cyber-teacher mechanism. We could also mention Poisson's triangle (2003) and Kim's FAID (instructor-learner-information-mechanism) triangle (2008) to support the argument that instruction in distance learning cannot be reduced to the three components mentioned by Houssaye.

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[1] Asynchronous means "occurring at different times". Asynchronous distance learning therefore involves a process by which students tackle the subject matter at different times (in keeping with their needs and personal schedules); it is the opposite of *synchronous* learning, which takes place at the same time and in the same place for everyone.

[2] Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi (1746-1827) was a Swiss pedagogue and educational reformer who exemplified Romanticism in his approach. He founded several educational institutions both in German- and French-speaking regions of Switzerland, and wrote many works explaining his revolutionary modern principles of education. His motto was "Learning by head, hand, and heart". Thanks to Pestalozzi, illiteracy in 18th-century Switzerland was overcome almost completely by 1830 (*Wikipedia*).

[3] Célestin Freinet (1896-1966) was a noted French educator and educational reformer who, in 1920, he founded the Coopérative de l'enseignement laïc teachers' union. He advocated methods that were anti-authoritarian, attempted to reconcile theory with practice, and promoted personal development and cooperative learning via active methods (*Robert* 2006).

While these models certainly merit further exploration, we should not lose sight of the aim of this article—i.e., to study the characteristics that define the TSR in an asynchronous distance-learning context. As mentioned previously, with this type of instruction, teaching and learning are isolated (Page 2014); Peraya qualifies distance teaching as offline instruction (Peraya 2011) accomplished by means of tools and technologies. Under such circumstances, how is the teacher-student relationship manifested?

MODEL OF HOUSSAYE'S "PEDAGOGICAL TRIANGLE"

By means of his famous "pedagogical triangle" (see Figure 1), Jean Houssaye (1988) conceptualized and formalized the basic elements involved in the practice of education. According to Houssaye, all teaching corresponds, in the "learning environment", to an interaction between two of the three points of a triangle: the "teacher", the "learner", and "knowledge". Different kinds of relationships are established between these points in keeping with the related components. There is thus a distinction between the "teaching process", which involves teacher-knowledge interaction; the "learning process", which involves learner-knowledge interaction; and the "training process", which involves teacher-learner interaction.

Each of these interactions is indispensable to teaching and learning, and they should all be equally incorporated into the instructional strategy used. However, as mentioned by Houssaye (1988), such strategies are actually often based on only two of the three components, excluding the third and thereby resulting in an imbalance. An educator who favours the "teaching" process, for example, will emphasize the teacher and knowledge elements. Centred on didactics, knowledge, and the hierarchization of knowledge (characteristics of the lecture, in particular), this strategy is likely detrimental to learners—who, not being taken into account, may display disruptive behaviour in class or develop misconceptions about the subject matter.
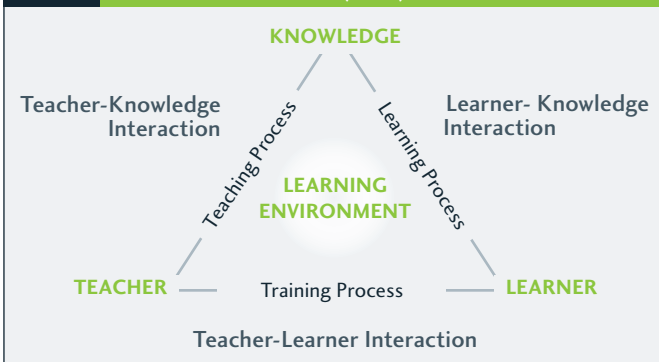
FIGURE 1 HOUSSAYE'S TRIANGLE (1988)

KNOWLEDGE

Teacher-Knowledge Interaction
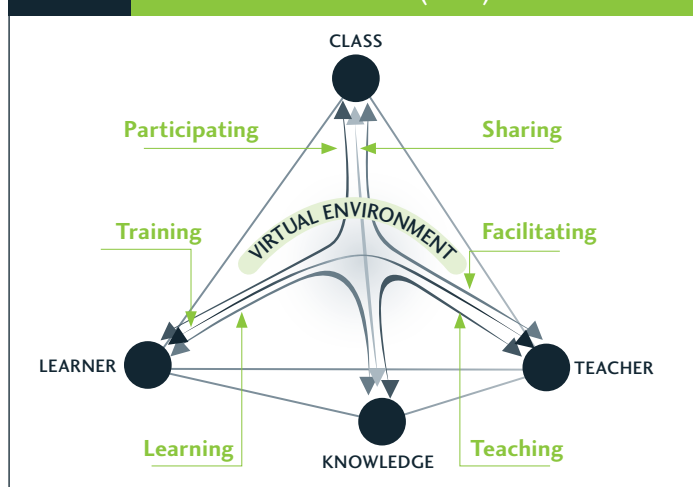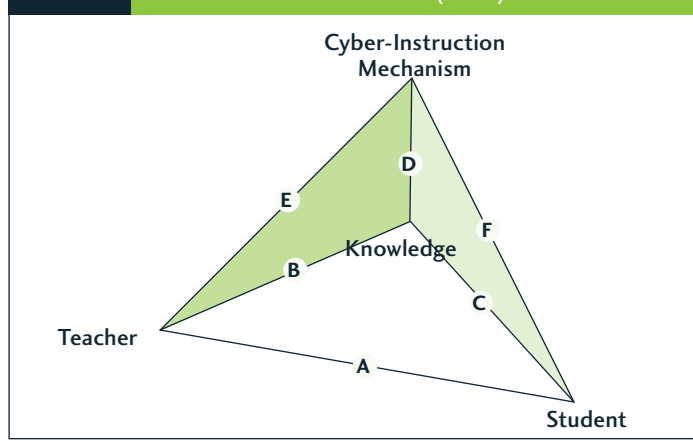
Learner- Knowledge Interaction

Teaching Process

Learning Process

LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

TEACHER — Training Process — LEARNER

Teacher-Learner Interaction

FIGURE 2 FAERBER'S TETRAHEDRON (2002)

CLASS

Participating   Sharing

Training   Facilitating

VIRTUAL ENVIRONMENT

LEARNER   TEACHER

Learning   Teaching

KNOWLEDGE

FIGURE 3 LOMBARD'S TETRAHEDRON (2007)

Cyber-Instruction Mechanism

D

E   F

Knowledge

B   C

Teacher

A

Student

◗ THE DISTANCE TSR: A TRUE MÉNAGE À TROIS!

In the context of distance learning, the TSR varies in keeping with a number of parameters, including course design and delivery model. As concerns the former, certain variables directly influence the selection of an appropriate instructional model and, as a result, the nature of the relationship between the teacher-as-course-designer and the distance learner. Those variables include, for example, the choice of instructional theory, the development of specific instructional strategies, and the choice of media and level of interaction and interactivity. The CÉGEP à distance has identified four delivery models that have had a direct impact on the teacher-student relationship.

Bimodal Education

Bimodal education involves both students who take courses in a physical classroom and others who, at the same time, are engaged in distance learning; consequently, it is characterized by a synchronous "meeting" of individuals who are in different places, and two audiences are reached at once.

Blended Learning

Here, "live" courses (i.e., those given in synchronous mode) are coupled with activities that take place remotely (i.e., in asynchronous mode); the number of synchronous and asynchronous activities may vary. These types of activity are offered to the same group of people.

Online/Blended Learning

This model combines activities that are completely remote, whether synchronous (virtual classes involving collaborative-work tools, exchanges, discussions, etc.) or asynchronous (via independent learning).

Independent Learning

Independent learning is made up solely of asynchronous distance activities; this type of instruction is individual in nature.

In the follow-up to this article, we will look more specifically at the TSR that is established in independent-learning distance courses. The design of such courses is based on an industrial approach, in that they are aimed at providing mass training remotely; they also form part of a cognitive-constructivist paradigm centred on learning that can be acquired in asynchronous mode. This design model generally involves a teacher (content expert) and an instructional designer (distance-learning expert). On the basis of technopedagogical guidelines that set out course instruction, media, supervision, and implementation strategies, the teacher and designer work together on developing course materials. Once these are ready, in the great majority of cases, the teacher will delegate or transfer the responsibility of supervising students to a "tutor", who then takes charge of distance training. In some cases, the teacher also acts as tutor, but, because there is generally a separation between the two functions (as the teacher designs the courses (educational dimension) and the tutor subsequently provides students with support (learning dimension)), the TSR becomes twofold. It is established both at the design stage (remotely between teacher and student) and at the delivery stage (between tutor and student). Let us now examine each of these relationships in greater detail, starting with the last and most obvious.

In a distance-course delivery context, the teacher-student relationship brings the tutor and student together. As asynchronicity makes it harder for students to engage with the instructor, they are forced to learn more or less on their own: it is up to them to make use of the resources at their disposal (Meyer 1999). The tutor may take either a proactive or a reactive approach in helping the student along. While the mentoring provided by the tutor remains a concept that is difficult to delimit, as it changes depending on the context involved and can be defined in a number of ways, depending on the individual concerned (administrator, teacher, student) (Nault 2007), several authors agree that the distance-education relationship between tutor and student involves a number of aspects, as described below.

- **Cognitive**

  The TSR consists of the support given to students so they absorb the methodological information in question, and also understand the administrative processes involved.

- **Social and Emotional**

  The TSR is based on values, attitudes, emotions, and self-esteem, which all have an impact on the learning process.

- **Motivational**

  The TSR is aimed at engaging students until learning is consolidated.

- **Metacognitive**

  The TSR allows students to take stock and critically examine their habits, goals, learning activities, and strategies, as well as the requirements involved. It also gives them the opportunity to become aware, in keeping with various aspects of their personality, of the cognitive, socio-affective, and motivational associations that shape their academic journey (adapted from Loisier 2010).

Let us now review the relationship between teachers of asynchronous distance courses and their students. This relationship is more difficult to describe, as it is established, not only remotely, but also "offline".

Developing instructional material for an asynchronous course requires a knowledge of the particular characteristics of this method. It would be wrong to think that this preparation could be reduced to converting simple course notes into PDF files; distance-education teachers and designers are responsible for formalizing knowledge, objectives, and educational options, as well as for making them accessible. It is exactly at the time courses are being designed that, from an independent-learning standpoint, an "offline TSR" is established. If online
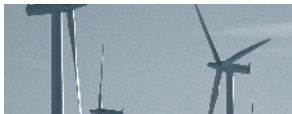
instructional and learning materials are to be relevant and effective, their design requires the mastery of detailed knowledge and content mapping, and the different aspects of the learning to be acquired must be modelled in keeping with a specific, detailed structure.

This meticulously planned arrangement is precisely what reveals the underlying relationship between student and teacher in a distance-learning situation. How teachers model and organize the learning process, create instructional materials, develop learning and assessment activities, prepare suitable training tools, and configure an appropriate environment are some of the factors behind a vision and teacher-student relationship characterized by a "delayed-response" dialogue and asynchronous interaction. Instructional materials thus include, not only those aspects required for learning, but also the teacher's choices, recommendations, advice, and so on. This particular TSR is established by and through by these materials.

Now that we have placed the TSR in a context of the pedagogical triangle and tetrahedron—i.e., in taking account of a concept that is fairly broad in scope—and examined the dual nature of the teacher-student relationship in asynchronous distance learning, we have arrived at our third objective: examining the often implicit causal link that exists between the teacher-student relationship and academic success.

> *...the TSR becomes twofold. It is established both at the design stage (remotely between teacher and student) and at the delivery stage (between tutor and student).*

▸ **I TEACH, YOU LEARN—NOT QUITE SO SIMPLE!**

No one will argue that a quality teacher-student relationship (QTSR) helps create a climate of trust and security in which learning can be acquired. We do not intend here to challenge the dynamic bond between teaching and learning, but rather to examine the frequent association of both concepts, which implies a causal relationship.

Most importantly, what is meant by "learning"? Generally speaking, there are two types of learning, as noted by Larue and Hrimech (2009), who noted that:

"Marton and Säljo (1976), Entwistle (1988), and Romano (1991) all distinguish between deep and surface learning. Deep learning involves behaviour displayed by students who actively process information and use organizational and knowledge-development strategies rather than memorization. Information-processing support strategies (e.g., metacognitive, affective, and management strategies) may further or hamper either approach; works by Ramsden (1988), Entwistle (1988), and Frenay, Noël, Parmentier, and Romainville (1998) all allow for this interpretation. With deep learning, students develop and organize their knowledge, experience the need to make sense of information, are highly affectively involved, and use more resources to learn. The opposite is true with surface learning: students use strategies that rely on memorization and knowledge reproduction, display only an instrumental interest in the subject matter, do not reflect metacognitively, are not affectively engaged, and make minimal use of the resources at their disposal." (Larue and Hrimach 2009)

Teachers and designers of distance courses obviously wish to support and enhance the consolidation of deep learning. However, they face at least two problems. The first is related to the validation of learning. In an asynchronous distance-learning context, teachers can verify what students have learned only by reviewing the work they submit. Unable to assess their students' situation except through this "prism", teachers are unaware of the path taken and progress made in acquiring knowledge. The second is directly related to the hiatus between instruction and learning. Not only is the feedback needed to advance learning fragmented, as we have just seen, but it is also indirect, as it usually comes from the course tutor.

Consequently, while distance learning is usually geared toward instruction—i.e., the phase in which the teacher is in control, organizing and structuring the course—most of the time, paradoxically, that individual does not know the results of his or her efforts. Under such circumstances, it is indeed difficult to establish a direct, unambiguous causal relationship between the processes of teaching and learning.

More broadly speaking, and independently of the distance-learning or any other context, the establishment of any such bond is not easy to demonstrate. In some cases, because of their skills, knowledge, experience, personality, attitude, and flexibility, teachers are certainly able to evoke interest and motivation in their students. As emphasized by Saint-Onge (1993), however, organizing the transmission of knowledge, using diverse instructional strategies, preparing activities and assessments, taking account of a class's heterogeneous nature, suggesting alternative learning pathways, respecting each

student's style of learning, and providing the necessary tools are no guarantee that learning will be acquired. We are not trying to discredit the work of educators or advocate elaborate paraphernalia aimed at promoting learning; nor are we suggesting that students alone are responsible for what they learn. We are simply stating that teaching and learning are obviously two disparate processes. Students do not learn because teachers teach: learning can never be reduced to an on/off mechanism that functions as a closed system; the process cannot be generalized (if it could, it would be systematically possible to ensure meaningful learning!). Heterogeneous classes and outcomes have proven this is just not so; the learning process is so complex it is almost infinite. The neurosciences, brain-imaging technologies, and clinical studies have only begun to reflect this fact. As stated by Jensen

> "the learning process begins with a stimulus. The latter, which may be an idea or a new experience, is classified and processed at several levels. The last step consists in establishing a prospective memory, in which all data are in place and are easily remembered." (Jensen 2001)

In other words, in the sense that it is disorderly, unpredictable, and extremely complex, the process is chaotic.

Still, while being unable to ensure that a given teaching process is at the origin of specific learning, teachers are responsible for using strategies that promote and maintain deep learning. In a world so full of questions and turmoil, we feel it is important to get back to the source of all learning—i.e., discovery, action, and enjoyment. Instructional methods based on exploration and action have long since proven themselves, as illustrated by the title of an article by Lebrun (2011): "I Teach Less, They Learn More" (J'enseigne moins, ils apprennent mieux). Above and beyond their specific characteristics, these approaches share an ability to create enjoyment. Now there's a word that can make educators uneasy! Enjoyment is hard to define, and even harder to measure. Without wishing to proselytize or moralize, we simply want to emphasize the fact that enjoyment motivates, helps students make progress, and gives them confidence. In his latest work, *Le plaisir d'apprendre*, Meirieu notes that:

> "the transmission of knowledge is tenuous and often random; learning is occasionally thankless and strewn with pitfalls. The basic challenge of teaching is to generate the desire to learn and help students feel the joy of understanding. Our task, as educators, is to put enjoyment back at the heart of learning, and for life; our role

is to help students integrate knowledge, so as to empower them and allow them to implement their skills. The love of learning lies in this challenging friction that must steer students toward culture, not routine exercises." (Meirieu et al. 2014)

The pleasure of relating items of knowledge; the enjoyment of seeking, finding, and asking questions; the gratification in solving a problem... Above all, learning should be a source of enjoyment. Moreover, enjoyment should constitute the very foundations of the relationship between teacher and student.

In distance learning, enjoyment stems notably from the opportunity to undertake a learning process that is accommodating and sustained, *inter alia*, by the flexibility of the environment in question and its ability to allow students to benefit from a personalized approach, which must meet the specific needs and fit the profile of all involved. Students should be encouraged to make their own choices, follow their own paths, decide what resources to use, set their own goals in keeping with their personal educational needs, and exercise their free will. Based on the metaphor of the map and compass (Fabre 2011), the type of distance course that can accomplish all this embodies personalized learning and allows students to be the main actors in, and architects of, their own journey. The enjoyment they feel will result from being able to express themselves and exercising freedom. There are certainly models of open, flexible, and adaptable distance courses that point students one way instead of another, help them make connections, select resources by means of the guidelines, strategies, and tips provided, but such models are still largely exploratory or novel.

> *Above all, learning should be a source of enjoyment. Moreover, enjoyment should constitute the very foundation of the relationship between teacher and student.*

◗ CONCLUSION

We have attempted to demonstrate that distance is not absence, and that the educational relationship between teacher and student exists even in the specific context of asynchronous distance learning. Moreover, that relationship is dual in nature: it takes the form both of the interaction between tutor and student and of the bond between the latter and the teacher/course designer via the development of instructional materials. As for the benefits the TSR can have on academic

success, we would do well to remain modest and bear in mind that the primary function of educators is to kindle a desire to learn, which involves giving students the opportunity to doubt, hesitate, choose, explore, and enjoy! ◗

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