

Hello My Name Is: Relationships as Motivation in the Undergraduate Classroom

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ABSTRACT

Teacher-student relations are a strong motivator and indicator of learning. Trust between teacher and student is a fundamental prerequisite for higher learning (Curzon-Hobson, 2002). Further, the relationship allows for the construction of a safe and nurturing environment that facilitates the students' ability to create and trust their knowledge (Raider-Roth, 2005). Relationships may even be correlated with student participation and enthusiasm for discussion (Davis, 1993). The purpose of this study was to assess the impact of a deliberate focus on relationship building in the undergraduate classroom at the United States Military Academy. Using a teacher-as-researcher method, the instructor asked students to make personal introductions for 4 classes (semester 1), 8 classes (semester 2), and 11 classes (semester 3) to support class cohesion and improve classroom participation by enhancing student-student and student-teacher relationships. The study used qualitative data to assess the impact of introductions on student participation and satisfaction and to facilitate the development of student enthusiasm.

Keywords: relationship, motivation, classroom engagement, classroom participation

บทคัดย่อ

ความสัมพันธ์ระหว่างครูและนักเรียนนับเป็นแรงจูงใจหลักและตัวบ่งชี้ของการเรียนรู้ รวมถึงความไว้วางใจระหว่างกันถือเป็นสิ่งจำเป็นพื้นฐานสำหรับการเรียนรู้ที่สูงขึ้น นอกจากนี้ความสัมพันธ์จะช่วยเสริมสร้างสภาพแวดล้อมที่ปลอดภัย ซึ่งช่วยส่งเสริมความสามารถในการเรียนรู้ของนักเรียน ความสัมพันธ์อาจเกี่ยวข้องกับการมีส่วนร่วมของนักเรียนและความกระตือรือร้นในการสนทนา วัตถุประสงค์ของการศึกษานี้คือการประเมินผลกระทบของการมุ่งเน้นในการสร้างความสัมพันธ์ในชั้นเรียนระดับปริญญาตรีในสถาบันการทหารสหรัฐ โดยใช้วิธีการวิจัยของอาจารย์ในการถามนักเรียนให้ทำการแนะนำตัวใน 4 ชั้นเรียน (ภาคเรียนที่ 1), 8 ชั้นเรียน (ภาคเรียนที่ 2) และ 11 ชั้นเรียน (ภาคเรียนที่ 3) เพื่อสนับสนุนการทำงานร่วมกันและปรับปรุงการมีส่วนร่วมในชั้นเรียน เพื่อเพิ่มพูนความสัมพันธ์ระหว่างนักเรียนกับนักเรียน และนักเรียนกับครู การศึกษานี้ใช้ข้อมูลเชิงคุณภาพในการประเมินผลของการมีส่วนร่วมและความพึงพอใจของนักเรียน รวมถึงสนับสนุนการพัฒนาความกระตือรือร้นของนักเรียน

คำสำคัญ: ความสัมพันธ์, แรงจูงใจ, ความตั้งใจในชั้นเรียน, การมีส่วนร่วมในชั้นเรียน

"One looks back with appreciate to the brilliant teachers, but with gratitude to those who touched our human feelings. The curriculum is so much necessary raw material, but warmth is the vital element for the growing plant and for the soul of the child." – Carl Jung

Teacher-student relations are a strong motivator and indicator of learning. Trust between teacher and student is a fundamental prerequisite for higher learning (Curzon-Hobson, 2002). Further, relationships within the classroom support the construction of a safe and nurturing environment that facilitates students' ability to create and trust their knowledge (Raider-Roth, 2005). Relationships may even be correlated with student participation and enthusiasm for discussion (Davis, 1993). The purpose of this study was to assess the impact of a deliberate focus on relationship building in the undergraduate classroom at the United States Military Academy.

Research evidence indicates that relationships impact both academic motivation and academic outcomes. When students believe that their peers and teachers like and respect them, they are more likely to achieve academic success (Goodenow, 1993; Ladd, 1990; Ryan & Patrick, 2001). "Research is clear on this point: Effective teachers are warm, caring individuals who, through a variety of statements and actions, communicate a respect for their students, an acceptance of them as they are, and a genuine concern about their well-being," (Ormrod, 2003, p. 482). There are many benefits for developing positive relationships with students – students who feel cared for by their teachers in their learning environments experience higher self-efficacy for learning, enjoy learning more, are more likely to request needed help, less likely to cheat, and more likely to achieve at high levels (Hayes, Ryan, & Zseller, 1994; Kim, Solomon, & Roberts,

1995; Murdock, Hale, Weber, Tucker, & Briggs, 1999; Osterman, 2000; Ryan & Patrick, 2001; Ryan, Pintrich, & Midgley, 2001; Wentzel & Wigfield, 1998). Further, Gorham and Millette (1997) indicate that students attribute demotivation (i.e., loss of motivation for academic performance) to teacher behavior, including lack of enthusiasm.

In fact, both current and prior classroom relationships can impact current learning. According to Hamre and Pianta (2001), the effects of student-teacher relationships are enduring. In one study, children were tracked from kindergarten through eight-grade. The quality of the child-teacher relationship in kindergarten predicted academic and behavioral outcomes through 8th grade, even when controlling for gender, ethnicity, cognitive ability, and student behavior ratings. The authors reported a strong, persistent relationship between early teacher-child relationships and later school performance. However, while early educational environments are influential in student development, teacher-student relationships continue to matter throughout the educational experience, including within the college classroom. The quality of interaction between teacher and student, and among students in the classroom, will impact both student motivation to learn and student learning outcomes. Palmer (1993) emphasizes that good teaching is more than mere technique or content. Rather, good teaching is built, at least in part, on what Palmer calls critical moments – in a critical moment, students encounter a learning opportunity and either open to it or shut down, based on the teacher's reaction. The teacher-student relationship and the student-student relationship determine whether students feel safe to open to learning in the critical moment. Likewise, Curzon-Hobson (2002) indicates that trust is a critical component of the higher education environment and a foundation for the learning

environment. Relationships matter in the classroom, then, because they determine whether or not students learn.

There are three aspects of relationship in particular that impact student motivation for learning: *classroom climate*, the individual student's *need for relatedness*, and the *expectations of the instructor*. The *classroom climate* impacts how students feel about both the learning situation and the learning experience (Ormrod, 2003). Instructors can facilitate a supportive classroom climate by implementing basic strategies which include: showing acceptance, respect, and caring for students; establishing a businesslike but nonthreatening atmosphere; communicating appropriate messages about the relevance of the subject matter; allowing students to experience some control in the classroom and learning environment; and creating a sense of a learner community (Ormrod). A cooperative classroom environment as opposed to a competitive classroom environment will increase both student productivity and intrinsic motivation for learning (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Creating a sense of community in the classroom will increase student engagement and support learning (Ormrod).

All people have a need for social connection and the experience of secure connection, love, and respect with other individuals, or a *need for relatedness* (Ryan & Deci, 2000). This need for relatedness is relevant for faculty, as it impacts human motivation. Students' needs for motivation may impact their relationships with both their teachers and with their classroom peers (Ormrod, 2003). Relatedness needs may impact students by motivating them to choose social activities over academic work (Dowson & McInerney, 2001; Wigfield, Eccles, MacIver, Reuman & Midgley, 1991). Students may be concerned with what others think of them, which can be expressed either by attempting to present a certain image (Juvonen, 2000) or by supporting and helping peers in order to gain positive regard (Dowson & McInerney; Ford, 1996). Relatedness needs are expressed in two main forms: *need for affiliation* and *need for approval*.

Students with a high need for affiliation may focus on connecting with peers, which can interfere with the learning process. Wentzel and Wigfield (1998) suggest teaching strategies support teaching and affiliation, to increase student motivation for learning tasks. Group-based activities (debates, cooperative learning tasks, educational games, etc) can all support learning and affiliation simultaneously (Brophy, 1987; Urdan & Maehr, 1995). Students will also seek affiliation with their instructor (Ormrod, 2003). When students feel personally valued by their instructor, they are more likely to succeed academically (Phelan, Davidson, & Cao, 1991). Students with a high need for approval have a desire to experience the positive judgments of others (Igoe & Sullivan, 1991; Juvonen & Weiner, 1993; Urdan & Maehr, 1995). Approval needs can focus on peers (and lead to increased susceptibility to peer pressure, Ormrod, 2003) and on the instructor. Student needs for instructor approval can increase motivation for good grades (Hinkley, McInerney, & Marsh, 2001), but can also lead to a dependence on praise (Harter, 1975; Rose & Thornburg, 1984).

Instructor expectations may also impact student relationship building and classroom engagement. Teachers communicate their expectations for student engagement in both subtle and obvious ways. When teachers provide additional time and content cues, they communicate the belief that the student is competent to answer correctly (Allington, 1980; Good & Brophy, 2003; Rosenthal, 1995; Woolfolk, 2005). Likewise, teachers who smile, lean forward during discussion, and nod, communicate positive affect and encouragement (Woolfolk & Brooks, 1985). When teachers set the expectation through verbal and nonverbal cues that student engagement and participation is valued, it may have a positive impact on the development of student perceptions of the learner community.

Both research and theory indicate the importance of relationships in supporting motivation for student learning. However, while Emmer,

Evertson and Anderson, (1980) document the use of introductions as standard practice during the early weeks of the school year in an elementary school classroom, we were unable to identify any studies that specifically investigated the use of student introductions in developing student relationships within the undergraduate classroom. We propose that while introductions are a very basic and preliminary part of relationship building, they are foundational to relationship building. We anticipated that by facilitating regular introductions among the students, the students would be more aware of their classmates and thus more likely to engage with each other as individuals. The purpose of this exploratory study was to assess the potential impact of a deliberate focus on relationship building, through the use of personal introductions, in the undergraduate classroom.

Method

The research proposal was reviewed by the U.S. Military Academy (USMA) Center for Teaching Excellence (CTE) for compliance with the institution's human subject's policies for teacher-as-researcher projects. The institution required teacher-as-research projects to be conducted by the classroom instructor as part of their normal instructional techniques, and that participant data be confidential and/or de-identified. The study was conducted as part of an instructor professional development program, under the guidance and supervision of the USMA CTE. At the time of the study, the first author was the Assistant Director of the USMA CTE.

The second author was an instructor in the Department of Military History at the USMA. He taught multiple sections of a survey course in military history, which was a core course that all USMA students (cadets) were required to complete as a graduation requirement. The curriculum was standardized across all sections and all instructors of the course. Non-history majors were required to complete the course during their junior or senior year (history majors completed a different series of relevant courses). Class met for 55 minutes, every other day, for a sixteen-week term, with required attendance at all sessions.

During his first semester teaching, the instructor encouraged dialogue and student participation via the Socratic Method. Daily participation grades were a standard part of assessment in the course. Still, students were slow to engage in the discussion, and it took at least four weeks into the term before he noted active participation by the class. Even with the deliberate effort, he noted the lack of relationship among students; on the second-to-last class session, while taking attendance he asked who was absent, and one cadet responded "the guy who sits next to me with the funny hair."

In his subsequent three terms of teaching, he implemented a teacher-as-researcher project using ongoing personal introductions to support class cohesion and improve classroom participation by enhancing student-student and student-teacher relationship. Teacher-student relations are a strong motivator and indicator of learning. Trust between teacher and student is a fundamental prerequisite for higher learning (Curzon-Hobson, 2002). Further, relationship allows for the construction of a safe and nurturing environment that facilitates the students' ability to create and trust their knowledge (Raider-Roth, 2005). Relationship may even be correlated with student participation and enthusiasm for discussion (Davis, 1993). The study assessed the impact of personal introductions and their capacity to facilitate the development of student enthusiasm.

In this exploratory study, for three semesters, the instructor began class with personal introductions. He taught four sections per term, with 17 - 19 cadets per section. All cadets were required to participate; there were 72 cadets across all sections per semester, and total n=216. In semester one, cadets made personal introductions for the first four classes. In semester two, introductions were extended to

the first eight classes. In semester three, introductions were extended to the first eleven classes. Table 1 provides the questions asked.

Semester 1	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) First and Last Name 2) Name and Cadet Company (dormitory and student organization) 3) Name and future branch (army specialty) 4) Name and Cadet Job (position held in the student organization)
Semester 2	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1 – 4 5) Name and the sport they play (all cadets are required to participate in a sport) 6) Name and favorite war movie 7) Name and favorite historical figure 8) Name and hometown and state
Semester 3	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1 – 8 9) Name and Favorite historical period 10) Name and the reason they came to the Military Academy 11) Name and the reason they stayed at the Military Academy

Table 1: Introductory Prompts

Classroom participation was a standard component of the assessment model for the course, and each student received a grade based on daily participation (accounting for both quantity of participation – each cadet was expected to participate in every class session – and quality of participation – each cadet was required to demonstrate mastery of the required readings via their active participation in the class). The instructor noted frequency and quality of participation in every class to assign a daily classroom participation grade, which was averaged into a sub-course (unit) participation grade. Students also completed an "Introduction Survey" asking them to gauge the effectiveness of the introductions as a classroom tool. Further, there were standard sub-course (unit) evaluations at the end of each unit of the course, which allowed cadets to provide feedback about the course, course climate, and instructor, to support in-term instructional improvement.

To support student confidentiality, introduction surveys and sub-course evaluation units were confidential. The first author completed analysis of all data sources with de-identified data.

Results

Results demonstrate that the introductions had a positive impact on student participation, with students participating more as they went further into the course (after more introductions had been completed) and participating more in semester 2 (8 introductions) and semester three (11 introductions) than in semester 1. Table 2 reports classroom participation grades. As well, introduction survey feedback (completed by students in semesters 2 and 3) shows a positive trend in student perceptions of the experience, with the majority of students reporting that the introductions helped them get to know their classmates, improve their classroom participation, and feel cared about by their instructor. As well, 85% of students in semester 2 and 79% of students in semester 3 indicated that they would like other instructors to use introductions as a classroom tool. Table 3 provides introduction survey feedback.

	Unit 1 Participation Mean Grade	Unit 2 Participation Mean Grade	Unit 3 Participation Mean Grade
Semester 1	78.3%	83.3%	84.6%
Semester 2	86%	87.1%	89%
Semester 3	83.3%	90.12%	89.2%

Table 2: Classroom Participation Grades

Did the in-class introductions help you get to know your classmates?	Very Much	Some Impact	No Impact	Negative Impact
Semester 2	26.9%	67.3%	6%	0%
Semester 3	18.4%	76.3%	5.2%	0%
Did the in-class introductions help you to participate more frequently in class?				
Semester 2	26.9%	40.4%	32.7%	0%
Semester 3	13.2%	55.3%	31.6%	0%
Did the in-class introductions make you feel that your instructor cared about you as an individual?				
Semester 2	51.9%	42.3%	6%	0%
Semester 3	57.9%	34.2%	7.8%	0%

Would you like other instructors to include frequent in-class introductions in their classes?	Yes	No
Semester 2	84.6%	15.3%
Semester 3	78.9%	21.1%

Table 3: Introduction Survey Feedback

Subcourse evaluation feedback also provided feedback on the impact of the introductions. In semester 1, with only 4 introductions, no cadets commented on the introductions in their evaluations. In semester 2, several cadets commented on the introductions in their evaluation, and all comments were positive. Cadet comments included: "I liked the introductions," "The introductions were a great idea," "The introductions were great, this is one of the only classes where I actually know people," and "The introductions made class more comfortable." In semester 3, several cadets commented on the introductions, but responses were both positive and negative. Positive comments included "Introductions helped facilitate class discussion and participation," and "Introductions helped bond the class as a group," while negative comments included "The introductions went on way too long" and "The introductions were ineffective in the way in which they were conducted."

Discussion

Introductions were implemented across three semesters of an undergraduate course at the United States Military Academy. The instructor's intent was to improve cadet awareness and knowledge of their classmates, to support improved classroom relationship among students and between the student and the instructor, and to encourage increased student participation in class discussion. The instructor's qualitative assessment of the intervention was that cadets became more invested in their own performance, and began to see their class unit as a cohesive team. The instructor also noted more appropriate professional dialogue among the students and greater understanding of military officership, discipline, and standards. Further, while the instructor's overall course average was consistent with course averages for other instructors teaching the same course, there were no final grades below C-minus in any of his sections. Anecdotal evidence provided by other instructors of the same course led us to conclude that cadets in the introduction sections were more likely to prepare for class by completing the required reading and to submit assignments on time. We propose that the relationship-building focus contributed to increased student responsibility for meeting course standards. In semester three, the instructor noted

decreased cadet interest in introductions toward the end of the 11-introductions. We conclude that 8 introductions was the optimal intervention for supporting classroom relationship building without becoming formulaic or repetitive.

Limitations and future research

This teacher-as-researcher study was conducted at the United States Military Academy, and thus many of the course/subject characteristics are unique (for instance, small class size (less than 20), required course sequence, standardized course content, mandatory classroom attendance and graded classroom participation, the overall mission of developing military officers in addition to teaching undergraduate content). As well, there may be unique characteristics of military cadets which do not apply to the broader undergraduate population. Further, because this was an exploratory, teacher-as-researcher project, data is predominantly qualitative, and there is no control group for comparison of results.

Future research directions include implementing the introduction intervention in a civilian undergraduate classroom to determine its effectiveness in a different cultural setting. Further, a future research study could use an empirical approach with comparison of experimental and control group sections to allow for comparison of student relationship, student motivation, and student performance when introductions are used in the undergraduate classroom.

Classroom relationships matter in both the traditional classroom and in the modified classroom of an online learning community, where technology strategies need to be developed in ways that support the development of classroom relationships (Bennett, 1999). Online courses often include required activities to introduce students and the instructor to one another; additional research could investigate the effects of these introductory strategies in the online environment on student learning.

Practical application

While this study was implemented in the unique environment of the U.S. Military Academy, the lessons learned may be applicable to other undergraduate instructors. Instructors may find that

relationship building increases student motivation to attend and participate in class. While relationship building strategies may be difficult to implement in large-scale lecture format classes, instructors of smaller class formats may find that introductions are a useful addition to the daily schedule, particularly in the early weeks of class. Many instructors may bypass introductions entirely to maximize instructional time, but this approach to save time in the short-term may have long term implications for student motivation and performance. Instructors who use relationship-based learning approaches (such as group work, study groups, and group projects) may find that introduction exercises in the start of the term support their students in more easily identifying peers with whom to collaborate on these projects. Likewise, instructors who actively encourage student participation in classroom discussion may find that introductions allow students to relate to each other as individuals, thus increasing the level of involvement and engagement in classroom discussion.

Instructors may try the introduction approach, or other strategies for facilitating student interaction, depending on class size and institutional constraints. Instructors interested in supporting relationship building within their own classroom through deliberate activity should consider the following strategies for successful implementation:

(1) Communicate respect for your students (Ormrod, 2003). Develop relationships with students as individuals, and focus on student strengths. Supporting a student's capability increases student self-confidence, which increases performance.

(2) Strive to treat all of your students equally. According to Woolfolk (2005), strategies for avoiding the negative effects of teacher expectations include: flexible grouping strategies, offering material at a level which challenges all students, being cognizant of responses used for correct and incorrect work for high-achieving and low-achieving students, maintaining fairness in evaluation, and monitoring nonverbal behavior.

(3) Teaching strategies which support relationship needs and facilitate the development of relationships in the classroom include: teacher questions, class discussions, reciprocal teaching, technology-based discussions, cooperative learning, and peer tutoring (Ormrod, 2003).

(4) Davis (1993) suggests that teachers learn as many of their students' names as class size permits and that teachers encourage students to learn each other's names and interests. In small classes, introductions and class activities can increase general comfort and familiarity. In large classes, instructors can assign small working-groups or cohorts, to facilitate relatedness within the larger class setting.

(5) Identify appropriate strategies to the institutional environment in general and class environment in particular, and be responsive to student feedback so that any approach is not over-used, thus becoming formulaic and reducing its effectiveness.

Summary and Conclusion

According to Anderman and Kaplan (2008) the domain of social motivation, and in particular its impact on academic performance, is still new and evolving. Anderman and Kaplan identify the three main focuses in social motivation theory and research as: (1) social motives, a focus on the social processes and social goals that direct behavior, (2) social relationships, and the role of interpersonal relationships and interaction (with teachers, peers, and even parents) and its impact on academic behavior, and (3) the social domain, including a more generalized sense of student belonging and identification with school. Anderman and Kaplan point out that any understanding of relationship and its impact of academic motivation and performance must consider cultural processes and cultural influence.

The intent of this study was to observe the impact of personal introductions in an undergraduate classroom. Due to the small scale and exploratory nature of the study, results should be considered preliminary, and future research should investigate the benefits of introductions in the classroom environment using an empirical framework. As well, results are limited due to the unique characteristics of the study sample. However, results indicate that promoting classroom relationship, through the use of personal introductions, may support student engagement, student interaction, and student motivation. As Anderman and Kaplan (2008) point out, these social relationships can impact academic behavior. Undergraduate instructors should consider how to better support their students' academic behavior by facilitating the development of relationships within the undergraduate classroom.

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