



Relationship-Rich Pedagogy: Cultivating Positive Classroom Experiences for Undergraduate and Graduate Students

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Relationship-Rich Pedagogy: Cultivating Positive Classroom Experiences for Undergraduate and Graduate Students

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Felten and Lambert's (2020) relational pedagogy encourages faculty to create educational experiences that ensure every student experiences a genuine welcome and deep care; is inspired to learn; encounters a web of significant relationships; and explores questions of meaning and purpose. These principles promote student success at both the undergraduate and graduate levels. This essay will provide methods to incorporate Felten and Lambert's relationship-rich strategies into courses ranging from general education to the graduate level.

Introduction

Why consider relational strategies? Accounts that “attendance has plummeted,” “students don’t like our subject,” “instructors want deep learning,” “students are disengaged” call on educators to refocus their instruction by cultivating positive classroom experiences that provide students a stake in their own learning. Relationship rich education is especially important to at-risk students—the impostorism these students might feel—including first-year and General Education, but can also be applied across other populations of students. Felton and Lambert’s (2020) discussion on the benefits of relationship rich pedagogy focuses on the general education experience. Relationships open the door for learning in General Education courses. The General Education classroom is a primary point of contact between the University and undergraduates and one of the most important sites for students to experience welcome, inspiration for learning, to build campus relationships, and to ask questions as they learn. However, many students who have surpassed the general education experience, even moving into graduate education, continue to struggle with maintaining motivation to experience deep learning. Relationship rich strategies are supportive of these students as well and Felton and Lambert’s concepts transition nicely into classroom settings at a variety of levels.

Context

The authors first came together in a professional learning community in Fall 2021 on the topic of Relationship-Rich Education in Teaching & Learning. Relationship rich strategies have been found to increase student engagement, motivation, and inspiration to learn. In turn, these relationships create a more comfortable, accepting, and student-centered environment which promotes a more impactful learning environment. In this Professional Learning Community, we explored the principles of Peter Felten and Leo Lambert's (2020) relationship-rich education. In addition, we designed and implemented strategies into our courses (Humphrey et al., 2022). Our combined teaching background includes more than 70 years of college teaching in English, Languages, Cultural Studies, Occupational Science and Occupational Therapy.

Overview and Analysis of the Four Relationship-Rich Teaching Strategies

1. Invite Students to Experience Genuine Welcome and Deep Care

The concept of “relentless welcoming” is a strong theme to launch relationship-rich education that evolves into faculty promoting genuine welcoming and deep caring in their classrooms (Felton & Lambert, 2020). Faculty can leverage even small steps to yield large results in building positive relationships with students. Student and faculty interactions can be very powerful if they are focused on being regular, purposeful, and affirming. Also consider the different layers of welcoming that occur from faculty to students and student to students. Often maximizing students' communication with each other, can shift a classroom milieu. Students can have very constructive and meaningful peer to peer interactions when they include individual accountability and positive interdependence. Start your class sessions with habits that build on your genuine warmth and concern for your students.

Here are several suggestions for faculty:

- Faculty can make sure to learn students' names by systematic use of simple paper desk tents, print out course photo roster or a virtual photo/ student name display.
- Faculty can consistently start class with “hello and how are you?” with genuine responsiveness to students needs and workflow for the course.
- Faculty can begin class allowing time for students to share announcements or celebrations for the good of the group.

- Faculty can provide lower-stakes assignments by returning the students work early in the term with formative feedback.
- Faculty can provide destressing and mental health benefit activities as the curriculum allows to launch the class session.
- Faculty can meet with students 1:1 as time allows, use personalized emails, or even make sure that students understand the explicit expectations of the class that promote each student's achievable success.

2. Inspire Students to Learn

Felton and Lambert (2020) argue that relationships lead to a transformational learning experience and increased motivation to learn. Providing an inspirational experience within the classroom initially sounds like an overwhelming task. In Lang's book "Small Teaching" (2016), it is suggested that even simple changes within the classroom and student interactions can have impactful effects on learning. Faculty can utilize this idea to incorporate small, tangible, relationship-rich practices into classroom experiences.

- Share personal stories: Faculty can create a relationship-rich environment by sharing their own personal stories about their career and educational experiences with students. Hearing personal stories can help students connect to the content and visualize the value of investing in the learning experience.
- Connect content to life experiences: Faculty should encourage students to connect the classroom content to their own life experiences. Creating space in the classroom for students to discuss their own experiences and connect new content to previous knowledge assists in developing deep learning.
- Share your "why": Students can have difficulty connecting abstract concepts to tangible outcomes, in turn making it hard to understand why they should invest their time and energy into learning specific content. Students may view these educational experiences as unnecessary or "busy work". This is particularly true for students who are engaging in early learning experiences or general education courses which they do not perceive directly relates to their chosen field of study. Faculty can help mitigate this type of disengagement by sharing their "why". Students are interested in knowing the reasoning (the "why") behind learning whatever is being taught. Faculty are experts in their content areas and therefore, have a unique opportunity to share how their course content can be beneficial

to students. Motivation to invest in learning is more likely when a student understands “why” they are being asked to learn “what” they are learning.

- Dialogue about content: Experienced faculty are aware that best practice calls for teaching and assessment in a variety of formats. Inspiring students to learn is the same. Students may not naturally be inspired to learn in a traditional classroom experience or by hearing content from only one source. Creating time within a classroom setting to allow students to open dialogue with their peers and instructors encourages deeper thinking, fosters curiosity, and facilitates motivated learning. Students should have the opportunity to share their own thoughts about a topic, share examples of how they view the content, and ask for clarification without being concerned with answering a question in front of the class. Relationships inspire learning and conversations are a foundational piece of relationship building.

3. Help Students Develop a Web of Significant Relationships

Universities are social bubbles that offer opportunities for students to interact with new ideas and build communities around them. However, aggravated by the COVID-19 pandemic and quarantining, universities can also be isolating to many students. First-year students experience an academic culture shift that oftentimes complicates learning and the establishment of communities. Similarly, first-generation students experience this academic shift from high school to college, but at times lack a support system beyond the university that can help them navigate this journey. This same academic context shift may also be seen in the transition between undergraduate and graduate level programming. In all respects, students have the right to experience a sense of community and build significant relationships that buttress their academic, professional, and personal growth in the universities. A web of significant relationships provides students support in multiple areas and in multiple forms.

Felton and Lambert (2020) refer to this web of support as constellations. It should be visible and recognizable to students, and readily available to them. It includes a diverse group of people with different interests and talents that enrich students’ experiences in the plurality of their interests. While this constellation should be specific to each student, it should also foster the intersection of peers, staff, and faculty. In these intersections, students experience the opportunity to create community. Thus, students not only have the right to experience a web of significant relationships, but these nodes of support can be instrumental

to combat social and academic anxieties, help dispel impostor syndrome, and contribute to retention efforts.

While faculty and staff are key figures in these constellations, university planning plays a bigger role in the development and implementation of a relationship-rich education culture. The institutions' responsibility for these relationships start the moment it makes contact with prospective students. They are responsible for providing faculty, staff, and students with support to build these relationships, such as appropriate representation and support to connect with students' families and communities. This support would continue into the students' on-campus life in the form of events, structured mentorship opportunities for advising like digital portfolios, or even time or monetary incentives for faculty-student co-creativity. A thriving and well equipped network of support is crucial to the effect of sustaining a relationship-rich educational experience for students.

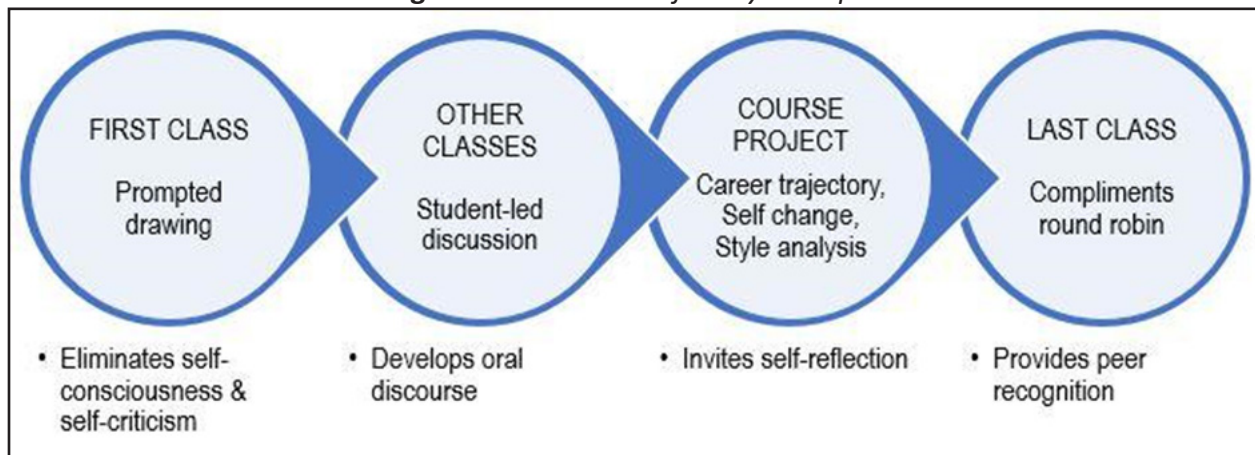
Faculty are in a unique position to help students tap into available resources and build a web of significant relationships. According to Bell Hooks (1994), "As a classroom community, our capacity to generate excitement is deeply affected by our interest in one another, in hearing one another's voices, in recognizing one another's presence (p.8)". The same can be said about a university community and the sense of visibility that students should experience that can create more campus engagement. Learning names, using desk name-tents in the process, greeting students, and arriving early to the classroom to converse with students are simple pedagogical practices that support a sense of personal connectedness. A linked-in classroom experience would include class based communicative exercises or assignments that promote collaboration among peers and guest speakers. It would also include assignments that involve other offices on campus (e.g., scavenger hunts, interviews, or event participation). A linked-in experience does not refer to the online professional networking page, but to the sense of visibility and validation students could experience in the classroom.

Transparency and intentionality are key factors in building these connections. While institutions are responsible for the network of support, faculty and staff are essential in building community. A relationship rich education is contingent on the relationships within the network of support. Students should experience a sense of personal connectedness that is a reflection of university practices. In the classroom, this looks as simple as humanizing students, practicing student-centered pedagogy, and linking curriculum to services and extracurricular opportunities that would enable student engagement.

4. Encourage Students to Explore Questions of Meaning and Purpose

A Fall 2020 study of Eastern Kentucky University first-year students revealed that students worried less about understanding content knowledge than about social concerns (Wentzel et al., 2021). Thus, educators can intersperse academic socialization activities throughout the story arc of the student's coursework as the student explores questions of meaning and purpose. In the semester trajectory, questions of meaning and purpose can be introduced in different forms (see figure 1).

Figure 1: Semester trajectory example



A stress-free first-class meeting while listening to an intercultural music mix eliminates the self-consciousness and self-criticism that is often associated with first meetings. An academic socialization activity for people who can't draw comes from Lynda Barry (2019), the great cartoonist. This first-class activity engages the student not only in questions of meaning and purpose but more importantly has the class laughing at themselves and with each other as they draw their future. Drawing to prompts, eyes shut, without lifting pen from page results in laughter with themselves, with each other as students walk around the room to enjoy each others' drawings and collaborate (Appendix A).

Another way for students to explore meaning and purpose is by externalizing their thoughts in debate with others; helping students improve their abilities to discuss topics is thus a key element of higher education. Daily we can encourage the use of spoken metadiscourse by modeling and allowing students to lead discussion. While the thesis and publications will matter later in an undergraduate's life, new students display the rigor of their thinking in the structure of their spoken language. Independent of course grades, faculty can ask students to use verbal cues to signal agreement, dissension, or return to a previous point. The goal is

for students to discern that expert discussion includes metadiscourse, defined as talk about the ongoing talk, and that signaling recognition of others' views, paradoxically, gives greater visibility and clarity to their own points of view (Bedetti, 2017).

We can encourage students to explore meaning and purpose with projects involving research and reflection on the student's possible career trajectory in a writing class or a creative group project in a literature course (Bedetti, 2015). A century ago in his chapter on "Educational Values," Dewey (1916) said that every step from savagery to civilization "is dependent upon the invention of media which enlarge the range of purely immediate experience and give it deepened as well as wider meaning by connecting it with things which can only be signified or symbolized" (para. 2). Students need to give expression to their experience, and teachers need to hear what students have to say. The process of finding metaphors to express and create meaning continues for students in higher education.

For the last class meeting, a round robin of compliments, whereby each student receives a specific compliment from every other person in the class, gives each student a sense of the strengths they have contributed to the group. The course ends with a feeling of closeness, and every student walks out with a boost of self-confidence. A student once commented wishing she felt such appreciation at every class meeting.

Conclusion

Relationship-rich educational practices, when applied intentionally, can have a meaningful impact on students and learning, including general education and first-year courses (Day et al., 2022). Students returning to in-person learning experiences will benefit from welcoming atmospheres that encourage engagement not only within the classroom but across their higher-education experience. Based on our exploration of relationship-rich educational practices, we offer several recommendations for further development:

- Design a welcome exercise for use on the first day (or first week) of class;
- Bring students to academic support centers (such as the writing or communication center, tutoring centers, and other programs that facilitate success) so that they can visualize themselves learning and studying in these spaces;

- Take attendance or design a small-stakes, memorable assignment in each class, and follow up with students if they are absent; and
- Design peer-to-peer learning experiences into classes early to encourage students to collaborate, build trust, and expand their academic networks.

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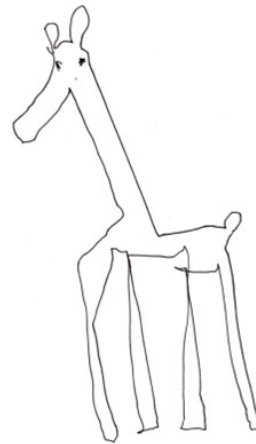
Appendix A

First Class Activity

While music plays from various cultures and styles, under two minutes per song

On a piece of white 8½ by 11" paper, *without lifting your pen off the page*

1. Close your eyes and draw a picture of your whole body, share with people to either side
2. Close your eyes and draw the Statue of Liberty, share with people in front and in back of you
3. Close your eyes and draw a giraffe, use the whole page, share



4. Close your eyes and draw a mermaid, share
5. Close your eyes and draw yourself I, share

Fold a piece of white 8½ by 11" paper in in half, and then in half again

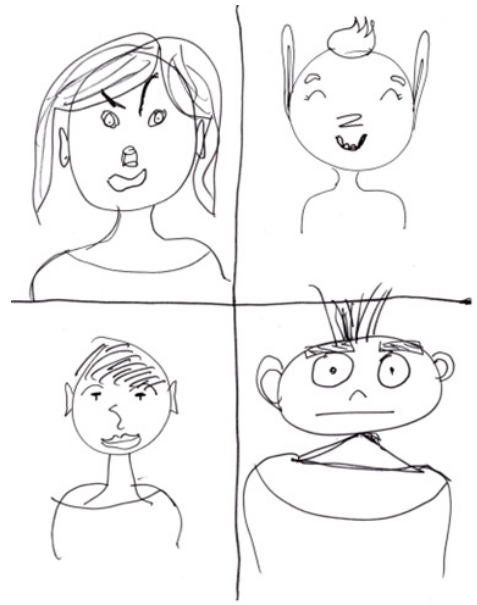
1. Keep the page folded and draw a shape in one square, add a face
2. Hand the page with a blank square up to the next person
3. Draw a new shape in the blank square and fold so the next person is looking at a square



4. Fold and pass along, blank square up
5. Continue until all four squares are filled

Fold another piece of white 8½ by 11” paper in half, and then in half again

1. Draw the outlines of a face
2. Next person adds features
3. Fold and pass and add expression



Everyone gets five 4 x6” index cards

1. Write the name of your favorite song on the card and draw an X on the other side
2. On the next card, draw yourself as a vegetable, place a frame around your drawing, and a caption with your name and today’s date outside the frame
3. Walk around and view each other’s drawings
4. On the next card, draw yourself as an animal, adding a caption with name and date



5. On the next card, draw yourself in space, caption with name and date
6. On the last card, draw a picture of yourself as a king or queen being worshiped by your people

Fold another piece of white 8½ by 11” paper in in half, and then in half again

1. In the square at the top left, draw a shape with the caption, “My name is _____.” Fill in the details.

2. In the top right square, draw your parents with the caption, "My parents are ___ and ___." Then tell where they met.
3. In the bottom left square, draw yourself and a sibling or friend, with a caption explaining something you did to them.
4. In the last square at the bottom right, draw yourself at your funeral and the people mourning you. For the caption, complete this sentence: "At my funeral, please play [the name of the song you wrote on the first index card]."

