



## Transforming Education: Using the Connectedness Cycle as a Framework for Instruction

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### **Author Biography**

Dr. Kim Vigil is an assistant professor at Murray State University, a mindfulness trained educator, an education consultant, and a Kentucky certified teacher in interdisciplinary early childhood education, elementary education, and physical education. Her research centers on screen time, executive function, mindfulness, mindful pedagogy, and mindset. Dr. Vigil has presented at numerous conferences, and she has provided professional development and workshops centered around mindfulness in education, and other education related topics. She has been in and out of various classrooms for the better part of 18 years, empowering both children and adults through supportive education, creating a more mindful community.

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## Transforming Education: Using the Connectedness Cycle as a Framework for Instruction

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*The connectedness cycle is an emerging framework for practice that advances the understanding and implementation of relationship-rich educational practices. These relationship-rich educational practices allow for more meaningful student engagement, and they serve to enhance academic outcomes. When embodied and implemented by faculty, the connectedness cycle has the ability to transform education.*

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### Introduction

Now, more than ever, relationship-rich educational practices are needed in our classrooms. Research has shown that creating connections with students, and supporting their personal well-being, facilitates academic success, including retention and graduation rates (Crowe, 2021; Guzzardo et al., 2021). The purpose of this conference proceeding is to introduce the idea of the connectedness cycle, or the dynamic and cyclical practice of making connections, giving support, and providing meaningful feedback to students (Vigil, 2022), as a framework for relationship-rich educational practices, and to provide examples as to how the connectedness cycle may be implemented in the classroom.

When taken in isolation, the connected cycle constructs (connections, support, and meaningful feedback) are research based pedagogical approaches to learning (Vigil, 2021). When implemented and embodied collectively and dynamically by faculty, however, they provide a pathway to greater success in the classroom in that they have the potential to boost engagement, and, in turn, academic outcomes.

### Context

COVID has certainly changed how society functions. Quarantines and social distancing brought to the forefront the importance of connections, not only in PK-20 school settings, but in work environments, as well. As such, although

the connectedness cycle is presented here in relation to educational settings, specifically higher education, it also applies to PK-12 education settings, and to employees in the workplace, as well (Vigil, 2021).

## **Overview of the Connectedness Cycle**

As previously discussed, creating connections with, giving support to, and providing meaningful feedback for students in higher education environments are essential practices for well-being and productivity. Naturally, connections must be created and nurtured to foster the start of relationship-rich education. However, once established, connections are continually reinforced through the remaining constructs of the connectedness cycle, giving support to and providing meaningful feedback for students. Again, as noted earlier, the dynamic and cyclical practice of the connectedness cycle is key to ensuring the success of its constructs as a framework for instruction.

### *Connections*

Creating connections and developing relationships are at the heart of teaching and learning. In the literature, creating connections was noted to include instilling in students a sense of belonging, whereby students felt supported by faculty, and they experienced satisfaction within their major (Crowe, 2021). Still other literature supported the notion of quality faculty-student relationships (Guzzardo et al., 2021; Raposa et al., 2021). Connection creating practices may be as simple as learning and using students' names (including their correct pronunciation), using faculty's personal experiences to model concepts, when applicable and appropriate, providing meaningful feedback in a timely fashion, and mentoring students (Guzzardo et al., 2021). More complex practices with regard to creating connections stem from high quality, mindful pedagogy, whereby students are engaged in personally meaningful learning activities. Moreover, in addition to faculty mentoring students, peer mentoring can be used to guide students in feeling connected (Crowe, 2021) as can internships or research related to the major, as opposed to social connections with faculty such as intramural recreation (Raposa et al., 2021).

The aforementioned practices all serve to instill a sense of belonging, resulting in greater satisfaction with the higher education experience, increased retention and graduation rates (Crowe, 2021; Guzzardo et al., 2021), and improved social and communication skills (Guzzardo et al., 2021). However, it's important to note that all practices must encompass inclusivity and awareness, and the act

of “...embracing student diversity in all forms – race, ethnicity, gender, disability, socioeconomic background, ideology, even personality traits like introversion – as an asset” (Guzzardo et al., 2021, p. 45). For example, in creating coursework for personality traits, including introversion and extroversion, differentiating coursework to allow students the option to work in groups, partners, or independently provides students with support, yet it furthers faculty-student relationships. This practice further illustrates how the constructs of the connectedness cycle are interwoven, and dynamic and cyclical in nature.

### *Support*

In looking more closely at giving support to students, supportive practices identified by researchers fall into one of two categories: autonomy and goal setting. Autonomy includes transferring the learning to students, providing them with choice (in both what is learned and how it is learned), connecting learning to students’ interests, clearly presenting why classroom choices are made, and creating meaningful and relevant learning activities (Hornstra et al., 2015). Note that these practices all require a good deal of knowledge of students, thus, these supporting practices can only stem from high quality connections and relationships. Support for students may also come in the form of goal setting, with a long-term goal paired with smaller, short term goals. These goals should be coupled with regular reviews, or critiquing, to produce improved outcomes (Napiersky & Woods, 2018; Tabachnick et al., 2008). Additional supporting practices include embodying a growth mindset, which often corresponds with using rubrics for grading, guiding effective study strategies, often through the use of checklists, providing instruction in emotion regulation, such as through teaching and modeling mindfulness practices, and having clear course structures and grading practices, including a clear syllabus, mutually developed rubrics, etc. (Respondek et al., 2017).

In looking more closely at grading practices, removing or modifying typical grading practices can promote greater opportunities for student-led work, student-graded work including both self-grading and peer-grading, allowing students to use a critical lens, and application projects that may be employed in the future (i.e. lesson plans for future teachers, technology resources such as websites, presentations, etc.) (Hornstra et al., 2015). When application projects allow for ongoing revisions and updates during the course of the semester, it creates a beneficial loop of instruction, application, and feedback for students. This correlates directly with goal setting, and embodying a growth mindset. Modifying grading can be easily done with the introduction of student-created rubrics, using

complete/incomplete rather than numerical grades, and/or focusing grades on just a few main assignments, such as one group assignment, one independent assignment, and one signature/capstone assignment during the course of the semester. An additional supporting practice centered on grades includes allowing class time for work on graded assignments, rather than assigning homework for grades. This may also be considered an equity building practice in that it ensures that all students have equal access to resources, peer groups for discussion, and faculty for guidance and feedback.

Finally, the art of creating “pedagogical space” (Guzzardo et al., 2021) involves being willing to adapt course policies, as needed, to accommodate students’ needs. Creating pedagogical space is arguably a mindful approach, or mindful pedagogy. Mindfulness is a nonjudgmental awareness of the present, including one’s thoughts and emotions. Embodying mindfulness in all aspects of instruction is essential to support students, and to scaffold their development of key self-regulation skills, as noted in the following:

When faculty members are mindful of their own thoughts and emotions in response to daily life, they then become better equipped to ascertain and understand the thoughts and emotions of their students regarding their daily lives...Faculty can choose to read the emotional needs of their students, and in turn, create pedagogical space while modifying instruction, adjusting due dates and/or assignments, and asking for students’ feedback as far as their academic and emotional needs. Modeling this mindful instructional practice, while simultaneously creating pedagogical space, both supports students in the moment, and teaches them how to advocate for themselves and their learning needs. (Vigil, 2021, p. 347)

Creating pedagogical space does not mean making work and/or requirements easier, but rather making an adjustment to due dates, task features, and/or classroom procedures or practices in response to students’ needs. Utilizing class time for course work also facilitates support for students in that they have equal access to resources, peer groups, and faculty, and faculty are able to mindfully observe how the learning process is unfolding, making changes as needed. In sum, embodying mindful practices, or mindful pedagogy, while simultaneously creating pedagogical space, provides much needed support to students, thus facilitating positive academic outcomes.

### *Meaningful feedback*

Self-reflective practices that are a part of giving support to students also serve to provide students with meaningful feedback. What faculty and students often fail to realize, however, is that while participating in metacognitive practices such as self-reflection, critiquing of goals, and self-evaluating work based upon mutually agreed upon rubrics, students are providing as much, if not more, meaningful feedback to themselves as are their faculty. This may be thought of as a guidance approach to learning, and it is important to the learning journey in that often students see faculty as the leaders in the classroom. This guidance approach empowers students, allowing them to see their own individual worth, and scaffolds valuable skills that transfer into the workplace after graduation (Rateau et al., 2015). These types of meaningful feedback practices, these metacognitive practices including self-reflection, critiquing of goals, and self-evaluating work using rubrics, typically have to be explicitly taught and modeled in order for students to become proficient in their practices, and to fully understand their benefits.

Another aspect of providing meaningful feedback to students includes providing them with appropriately challenging feedback. Similar to giving support to students, providing appropriately challenging feedback, that is meaningful feedback, can only occur when faculty have made connections with students and fully know their respective needs. Only then can feedback be tailored to the areas in which students need growth. This translates into feedback that is appropriately challenging as students.

### **Applying the Connectedness Cycle**

The connectedness cycle is a framework for instruction that, when used in an ongoing and dynamic fashion, can transform education. What, though, does it look like in the classroom? One example of the connectedness cycle in action includes Project Based Learning with graduate level in-service teachers. In this instance, the project involved student selection of an authentic classroom management problem or challenge that they have, or were currently experiencing, in their classrooms. Then, inquiry-based smaller class activities fed into one larger culminating self-selected presentation, which may be viewed here (<https://sites.google.com/murraystate.edu/murraystateclassroommanagement/home>). A second example of the connectedness cycle in action includes Project Based Learning with high achieving high school students (entering seniors). In this scenario, the project involved service learning and mindfulness, in which

lab-based classroom practices fed into one larger culminating self-selected projects, some of which included developing websites, persuasive speeches, and proposals for students' respective circles of influence. In both of these examples, learning was student-led via authentic and self-selected problems or challenges, it involved ongoing inquiry, evaluation and revisions on the part of students (scaffolded as needed), and the works were made public (see [www.pblworks.org](http://www.pblworks.org) for more information on sound project based learning practices).

A non-Project Based Learning example at the undergraduate level involves pre-service teachers creating a math lesson plan during their practicum mathematics methods class. This lesson plan is initially taught as a micro-teach to fellow classmates, whereby students gather feedback from their peers, and self-reflectively evaluate their own lesson plans. Students are then given an opportunity in class to make modifications to the lessons, and changes are scaffolded, as needed. Ultimately, the lesson plans are then taught in their respective practicum settings. This is a prime example of how application projects that encompass ongoing revisions and updates can create that beneficial loop of instruction, application, and feedback for students, further driving their feelings of support, and, in turn, fostering greater connections as a direct result of that support.

## **Considerations**

In sum, creating lasting positive change in the classroom comes from that which is valued. As practices from the connectedness cycle are put into play over time, in turn, they will result in a paradigm shift. The value of each of the connectedness cycle subcomponents independent of one another is presumably well known; however, it is essential to note that they must be implemented in an ongoing fashion, and they must be interwoven. Taken collectively, they then provide a pathway to greater success in the classroom (Vigil, 2022). When affective, or mindful, pedagogical practices that comprise the connectedness cycle are embodied by faculty, they serve as models for students, thus further supporting their success and well-being (Napiersky & Woods, 2018; Rateau et al., 2015). This demonstrates the importance of the dynamic and cyclical nature of the connectedness cycle.



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