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J. Brian Nichols
*East Texas Baptist University*

Charles Sutton
*East Texas Baptist University*

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## Abstract

The authors present their case for the development of strong and appropriate relationships with students as a key for success in college teaching. The model of Relationship Teaching includes a wide and varied agenda of techniques and commitments with which to strengthen the interpersonal relationships present in the educational environment.

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# Improving Academic Performance Through the Enhancement of Teacher/Student Relationships: The Relationship Teaching Model

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**Summary:** The authors present their case for the development of strong and appropriate relationships with students as a key for success in college teaching. The model of Relationship Teaching includes a wide and varied agenda of techniques and commitments with which to strengthen the interpersonal relationships present in the educational environment.

## Introduction

It is a tribute to those currently involved in Christian higher education that so much emphasis is now being placed on how to engage students in effective, profitable learning experiences. This may have evolved because of increased public demand for improved performance, or because of a historically-dominant research agenda (Travis, 1996). Nevertheless, for too long we have inordinately stressed the importance of cognitive knowledge of a particular subject or field, and a professor's ability to provide students with an opportunity to share in this knowledge. Although there is a direct correlation between knowledge of subject matter and teacher effectiveness, another vehicle which contributes to optimum student learning is the ability to develop the proper relationship with students, a relationship that becomes a motivator for those involved in the learning experience.

The relationship issue also contributes in areas other than academics. for instance, athletic coaches often talk about the value of the player-coach relationships, even stressing its importance over that of skills and knowledge of the game. Those involved in Christian higher education would do well to take note of this strong belief in the power of relationships and the positive effect they can have on student learning and institutional success.

What would it mean for a college professor to say that his students "sold out" this semester? Would it mean improved student attendance and fewer skipped classes? Could it result in more assignments being completed on time, more preparation being accomplished outside the classroom, or more student interaction during class discussion? Might it even result in improved performance on exams, laboratory and field-based activities? The answer to all of these questions is yes. "Relationship Teaching" (RT), a term coined and used routinely by the authors, can help produce positive results. Relationship Teaching, by definition, involves the incorporation of a number of techniques designed to enable teachers with differing personalities, varied teaching styles and those who teach in different fields to develop human relationship skills that can lead to increased student learning.

If the idea of Relationship Teaching has this potential, the next step in accomplishing it in our college and university classrooms is to identify what is required of a professor who employs it. If it is something that only a few can accomplish, it will be destined for failure like so many other instructional approaches of the past. On the contrary, if it can be accomplished with reasonable effort on the part of professors with differing personalities, varied teaching styles and by those who instruct in a multitude of fields, it can prove to be a notable contributor in the movement to be more effective in engaging our students.

## Contributors to Relationship Teaching

Routine demands of the job, which are necessary, important and good things to do (planning, accountability, publishing, completing forms, etc.), often cause professors to lessen their commitment to the most important aspect of their work: relating to and being responsive to the students and their needs. Sometimes professors subconsciously justify this approach because "these things must be done." In realizing that relationship teaching is the preferred approach, the professor will want to establish rapport, which then

enhances and leads to providing effective instruction.

**Establishing Rapport**

There are several contributors to the establishment of professor/student rapport. Jacobson identified at least six contributors in her work (Jacobson, 2000). Here, we cite several others. Contributors include the sharing of personal information, recognition of student accomplishments, campus-wide involvement by the professor, requirement of student conferences, and assisting students with community and /or outside involvement.

**Sharing of Personal Information**

Students are very much interested in getting to know their professors. In fact, even in China, students pay more attention to personal qualities than teaching quality when evaluating their teachers (Ting, 2000). A small amount of time spent at the beginning of a semester, preferably on the first day of class, to introduce themselves to their students can pay big dividends later. A simple response to the following questions or statements can serve as the kind of introduction envisioned here. Adding a touch or two of humor during this introduction serves to make the approach even more effective.

1. What is your name and where are you from?
2. Tell something about your family members, if ap plicable.
3. Describe one or two outside interests or hobbies that you enjoy.
4. Share some of your personal beliefs and/or expec tations regarding students in your class.
5. Where did you receive each of your degrees and for how long have you been teaching?
   Showing Personal Interest in Students

Throughout a semester there will be many opportunities to show students that you care about them. Sometimes it takes no more than following up after a student has been ill. A simple, "I hope you're feeling better today," goes a long way to demonstrate that you are interested in them. Professors have also been known to write notes to students, to send them e-mails or to ask about them through other students. "How did old McIntosh do last night in the ballgame?" might be an appropriate question to ask McIntosh's roommate after a big game. You can bet that he would pass it on. Or, a statement like, "The choir did a beautiful job yesterday," might serve as a great notice to a shy young lady that someone cares about what she does.

At least thirty years ago there was an English professor on the campus where one of us attended who committed himself to personally following the exploits of our basketball team. Not only did Dr. John Vaughn attend all home games, but he also traveled hundreds of miles, even to other states, to follow the team. When those players looked up from the gym floor and saw him in the stands cheering the team on, it proved that he cared. This showed all involved that he was interested in his students, and they have never forgotten it.

**Recognizing Student Accomplishments**

A professor's public acknowledgement of student accomplishments can serve as both a pride-booster and a morale-builder. Opportunities to do so arise from within a classroom setting and without. Are college-level students motivated by praise? Sure they are! When was the last time you, as a professor, bragged on the attendance habits of an individual in your class? What about students who are never late to class, are always prompt to turn in assignments, and who always strive to please? They should know that they are appreciated, and the best way for them to know that is for the professor to tell them. And, this can be done either privately or in front of others, depending on the circumstances.

What are other accomplishments worthy of recognition? Here is only a partial list:

- Academic recognitions or honors
- Top grades on a test or other assignment
- Superior attendance
- Extra effort to achieve a goal
- Progress made since a previous measurement
- Outstanding performance during a competition or contest
- Being named to an "All Everything" team
- Scoring the winning basket, hitting the game-win ning home run, etc.
- Providing notable community service

**Campus-wide Involvement by the Professor**

College professors would do well to be involved in

many and varied campus activities. There is no simpler way to be "visible" on any campus than to attend performances, games, and other activities. In this way the professor is modeling a behavior that students are encouraged to pursue, that of being actively involved. Don't we want our students to participate in many campus activities? Don't we want our elected officials to be present at important community and other events? Doesn't it impress us when the college president or some other upper-level administrator attends an event that we know was not absolutely necessary? Then, why would it not be beneficial for professors to do the same.

Not long ago a professor was strolling through the campus student union building and he noticed that one of his students was playing a game of ping pong. He stopped and started a conversation with those playing, and eventually grabbed a paddle himself and played a game or two. Before long, there was a crowd of students gathered around, cheering the professor on as he tried to best the much younger opponent. The ping pong win that day did much for the professor's ego. However, it probably did much more for the students who witnessed the contest. They saw that the distinguished professor was interested in more than just a subject area. While playing ping pong that day he built relationships in ways that no other venue would have afforded.

It was Robert Leeper who said, "We must remind ourselves that education is a people business in which the goals we seek and the things we try must eventually be judged in terms of the persons in the process" (quoted in Halloran, 1979). We simply cannot stay glued to an office or classroom and expect to optimally influence the students we teach.

**Requiring Student Conferences**

Today's college professor can approach student conferences in one of two possible ways. First, one can do the minimum by announcing one's availability and waiting for students to respond. Some meaningful results may be attained by this method, especially if the professor's students are intrinsically motivated and tend to take the initiative. In this scenario, some, albeit a small percentage, students will have an opportunity to interact with the professor in a personal and professional way. A second approach, one which demonstrates a professor's true belief in RT, would involve the professor's insistence on at least one one-on-one (or larger group where massive classes are involved) conference with students during a semester. These opportunities for professor/student interaction should not be minimized and can lead to positive results when used appropriately. One-on-one or smaller group conferences can do much for both the teacher and student. In only the rarest of cases do they prove to be a problem, so why not require them?

What can take place during these settings that might contribute to a student's performance? The following ideas are proposed:

1. Afford the student an opportunity to "introduce" himself/herself to the professor. Allow the stu dents to tell where they were born, the schools they attended, the activities in which they were involved and perhaps something about their interests. Personal information about family or other issues might also be discussed.
2. Have a discussion about a student's "learning style". It can be helpful for both professor and stu dent to be aware of this in order to provide oppor tunities for consistent and optimal growth.
3. Discuss with the student the expectations of the professor. The course syllabus can be used during this time to accentuate particular areas.
4. Make sure that both parties understand the grad ing system employed in the class so that future misunderstandings to not occur.
5. Acquaint the student with a schedule of office hours for future reference.
6. Go over any unique course requirements or expec tations that are evident.
7. If the conference occurs well after the semester has begun, apprise the student of his/her progress thus far.
8. Assisting Students with Community and/or Out side Involvement

Recently there was a kinesiology professor on a large college campus who was involved with one of her students through the local little league basketball team. The professor and the student co-coached a 10-11 year old girls' team in the metropolitan area where their university was located. The hours spent together in practice, game and less formal settings provided not only a great learning experience for the future coach,

but also served as an opportunity for a personal relationship to evolve. This same kind of experience could occur in many other important areas, including the visual or performing arts, scouting, ecological activities, volunteerism, governmental endeavors, historical venues, educational tutoring or mentoring, and many more.

**Providing Effective Instruction**

In education there are several essentials for a sound program. One of the most significant is effective instruction. To promote effective teaching in a way that establishes Relationship Teaching, the professor should provide prompt feedback, offer optional student assignments, set reasonable academic expectations, demand academic rigor, utilize multiple instructional materials, and provide tutoring sessions.

**Providing Prompt Teacher Feedback**

Productive learning cannot occur when the teaching-learning situation does not include prompt teacher feedback. The strategy of prompt feedback grows out of the principles that the fundamental purpose of all teaching is to promote growth and the teacher-learning process is a cooperative endeavor. Effective teachers know that prompt responses are important bases for guiding students in evaluating their work and in planning the next step of action. Providing prompt feedback by quickly returning graded/reviewed papers and tests, offering constructive criticisms/suggestions in a written format, or answering questions is important for student motivation and for revealing needs for subsequent learning. Written comments by the professor, although not always interpreted as intended, should avoid rhetorical jargon in order to enlist positive student reaction (Williams, 1997).

**Offering Optional Student Assignments**

Optional assignments help to provide more one-on-one instructor/teacher relationships. Adaptive instruction and individualized instruction programs are generally positive and seem to benefit all students. By reducing the instructor's structure of expectations, an opportunity and test are offered for the student to show self-sufficiency.

In field work, students may be assigned to different types of classrooms for teaching experiences. Students often participate in the assignment process. In addition to varied field experiences, other strategies may include use of modules (arranged by time according to the student's level of achievement, with students entering and leaving at different points), study guides with curriculum broken down into small units with clear objectives, and computerized instruction. The teacher, by de-emphasizing "one way" for all student performance and offering optional assignment possibilities, allows students to pursue the same or even different objectives, with all meeting the course requirements. Even allowing students the opportunity to generate class rules has proven to be effective (DiClementi, 2005).

**Setting Reasonable Academic Expectations**

Some college teachers are not yet fully ready to implement the principle of individual differences. If opportunities for learning are to be maximized, it is important to recognize the validity of differences in what students perceive and react to in all classrooms.

If instructors are fully ready to implement the principle of individual differences, they will better understand the learner and better condition his or her environment and learning experiences. Students learn better not only when the situation is free from fear, but also when undesirable tension is relieved because the learning environment is arranged in terms of individual differences.

Differences can be valued and differences can be used to promote growth. While teachers may value maximal opportunities for learning for all students, they seek optimum growth in terms of each individual. Such reasonable expectations cause students to strive toward their best.

**Demanding Academic Rigor**

Teachers understand that there is a relationship between expectations and behavior, and thus must be careful to see student potential and respond with appropriate expectations. The teacher's expectations are important to the future academic achievement of the student.

Demanding academic rigor through high expecta-

tions can be developed around the process of releasing human potential. Each person is born with more potential than he or she uses. Even students with what seems to be limited abilities need goals and expectations which involve challenges because they, too, do not develop all the potential within themselves.

Instructors who set high standards and demand academic rigor see great significance and responsibility in their role. With high expectations, students experience more positive feelings and a sense of personal worth because of challenging work, increased achievement and added responsibility and recognition. It is important for teachers to build a curriculum and have strategies which promote new insights and intellectual power for all students.

**Utilization of Multiple Instructional Methods**

Since no student learns best from only one instructional method, a variety of programs, materials, and methods must be offered. After all, the greatest teacher who ever lived was Jesus himself, and he taught with parables, lecture, hyperbole, questioning, and modeling.

Increased use of the computer in the teaching-learning process has been beneficial to many instructional programs. Some college instructors have experimented with paperless classrooms, with technological resources and electronic submissions. Others have opted for formats including satellite transmission to off-campus sites, videotape and internet instruction (Zirkle & Ourant, 1999).

Students learn through teaching, with students teaching peers, small groups, or the entire class. Team teaching has also become an effective approach in some environments (Wilson & Martin, 1998). With a variety of approaches and methods to meet the needs and learning styles of students, that special chemistry of engagement can be fostered.

**Provision of Tutoring Sessions**

Tutoring and tutorial programs should exist to help students and should not be seen as a strategy available simply for the struggling student. A tutoring program should be a well-defined component of a school's curriculum, with adequate staff and structured training for the staff. The training should include (1) how to relate to the student, (2) learning styles, (3) cultural awareness, (4) characteristics/needs of at-risk students, and (5) referral skills.

Tutoring should begin with where the student is in terms of achievement and progress from there. A tutorial program may include some self-tutoring, i.e., the use of programmed materials which allow the student to progress individually.

Tutoring has been very effective at the campus level through programs such as Reading Recovery. As educators seek ways to engage students in the act of learning, tutoring has proved to be effective in bringing sizable achievement gains in skills and content areas. In addition, research has shown that tutoring can have a significant impact on grades, credit and retention (Weinsheimer, 1998) and improves students' pedagogical and motivational outcomes (Merrill et al., 1995).

**Conclusion**

Effective and profitable learning experiences are determined in great part by professor-student relationships. Every Christian master teacher seeks "chemistry" with students. What brings about that special "chemistry?"

Engagement is based on the knowledge that students must be free to be who they are. When students and instructors share personal information, they become more real to one another; they become themselves. Students become aware that it is acceptable to differ and to be wrong because group trust and group acceptance are present. When students are actively responding, the instructor can know that learning is taking place.

When the instructor shows personal interest, students appreciate the concern and consideration and respond in engaging ways. Students want to be recognized for their contributions as well as their accomplishments, regardless of how seemingly insignificant. Campus-wide involvement by the instructor contributes to this positive student attitude.

Students know that good teachers provide time for conferencing and group interaction. When the professor requires a student conference, whether one-on-one or small-group, students infer that the instructor

sincerely wants to help and also desires feedback.

When one looks at all the contributors to relationship teaching, he or she becomes aware that what happens to students in school is shaped not only by the engagement opportunities provided in the curriculum, but in the special professor/student relationship. This relationship is the result of the professor engaging students with personal acceptance and respect and establishing high expectations and expecting active participation.

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***J. Brian Nichols is a professor of education and the Dean of the School of Education at East Texas Baptist University (ETBU). Charles Sutton is a professor of education at ETBU.***