

A REFLECTION ON FORMING STUDENT-TEACHER TRUST IN AN ONLINE CLASSROOM

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INTRODUCTION

In the age of technology, the novel coronavirus, despite hindering much of the world, has not been able to bring education to a halt. Instead, education moved to online platforms. While most teachers might agree that online education is not superior to a traditional classroom setting, it is still fortunate that educators have been able to continue their jobs without much interference. Of course, with a new classroom setting, the challenges educators face have changed as well. In the classroom, the screen acts not only as a divide between students and their classmates, but between students and their teachers. This is how the online classroom can cause great distress to educators and students alike: a lack of ability to form a real bond with each other.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The importance of teachers being able to connect with their students comes from the understanding that a close relationship with a teacher encourages students to be more active in their learning. Student-teacher connection is envisioned as having value beyond creating a better experience for students and reaping more positive classroom results (Gillespie, 2005). Not only does it encourage students to want to improve for their own sake, but in order to prove to the teacher that they have understood the information. What students can gain from having classes online is arguably less than what they can gain from a traditional classroom experience (Cifuentes & Lents, 2010), but as educators, we have to recognize that the human experience of relying on technology has expanded to the classroom, and that not every student has the same exposure to technology as others (O'Donoghue et al., 2004). Educators, in the time of crisis, have to recognize that students' level of previous exposure to computers and technology plays a large part in the online classroom. Some students will have a large amount of experience with computers, and others will be limited, yet they are expected to perform at the same level regardless (O'Donoghue et al., 2004). In a traditional classroom, the students' understanding and skill can be directly seen and understood by a teacher, but online, the students' difficulties could be due to technology rather than their skill in the subject. This is why teacher-student relationships are even more important when put in an online setting; a direct relationship with a student allows the teacher to better understand the difficulties they are facing. Drop-out rates and failure rates are directly linked to teacher-student relationships at any given university

(Hagenauer & Volet, 2014), and in a trying time such as a pandemic, teacher-student relationships become even more important, despite being more difficult to naturally achieve. Students cannot be forced to engage with their teachers, but if they feel the opportunity does not exist, then their chances of success are already lessened (Hagenauer & Volet, 2014). Isolation is the number one way to lose student motivation (O'Donoghue et al., 2004), so educators need to be prepared to lessen the feeling of isolation and create an engaging environment so that students feel they are directly involved in their learning (Hagenauer & Volet, 2014).

SEMESTER OVERVIEW

During the semester, many students spoke to me about the difficulties they felt they were facing in terms of motivation and connection with the class material and other students. Some felt they were not skilled enough in the English language to participate in class and therefore wouldn't be able to communicate with me, their instructor, or the classmates who seemingly have a high level of English proficiency. While this is expected in any classroom for the first couple of weeks, as the semester continued online, the students had not broken free of their shells and continued to retain the same shyness and lack of willingness to participate. The online classroom setting itself made it difficult for me to encourage them to try, and in my perception, made it difficult for students to feel they were improving in their language skills.

What I came to understand for this is that students lacked motivation because they lacked connection with others who could motivate them. So, I changed my classroom approach, hoping that I could increase the amount of time students spent interacting with each other. By increasing their time together, I inadvertently decreased my time with them. Of course, there is no way for me to force students to meet with me one on one, so I would encourage them to visit my office hours or to have a conversation with me. This encouragement was highly ineffective and left me with an empty office. Perhaps their concerns over their level of English led to uncertainty about attempting to speak with me one-on-one. Perhaps when I said "see you next class" to students, they understood that to mean I would not be willing to speak with them until that time.

I wish I could reflect on how well I was able to form bonds with my students over the course of the semester, but I find that I was lacking in forming bonds with students more than I was successful. As someone who has always felt quite close with her students, and had students come to class early and stay late to chat with me, losing that to the online classroom setting was a blow to my pride. I also found that no matter how cheerful or funny I tried to be in class, a grand majority of students rarely gave me more than the continued blank stare at their computer screen. Unless I was able to directly speak with a student, I was unable to gauge their level of

engagement with the material. There is a lot to be said for reading the room, and in a room by myself, attempting to teach to a computer, there was no room to be read.

In an effort to improve my relationships with my students, I began to open my Zoom room five minutes before class time, to create a virtual free chat space for students. They weren't expected to join early, but they had the opportunity to 'come early to the classroom.' Their cameras and microphones could be on or off as they saw fit, and I think this made a huge difference in that they could come without pressure. About a quarter of my total students took advantage of this opportunity to either speak with me about projects, the upcoming class, or difficulties they had in a previous class. Although the conversations with students were usually not more than thirty seconds per student, the turnout of early joiners was greater than I expected. Beyond having the classroom open five minutes early, another measure I took (which was also the one that seemed to make the most difference while being the easiest to provide) was examples. If I spent the time to create two personal examples of assignment answers to students, they felt they could get to know me better and feel more comfortable speaking to me about presenting videos or writing papers that they would otherwise have been hesitant to share. The examples also made it easier for me to explain to them what I wanted them to do, and they were then more willing and able to ask me specific questions. I still do not know if I have really created a good relationship with them, but at least I have made myself someone they feel comfortable talking to or someone whom they can ask for help.

IMPACT ON FUTURE CLASSES

In the continuance of the 2020 pandemic, it is imperative that teachers take into consideration that teaching online is not only difficult for teachers in terms of relaying information but also in terms of connecting with students. During introductory units or orientations, taking the time to bond with students in a manner deeper than just giving a self-introduction may make the difference between teaching a class without assurance of how well material was understood, and successfully teaching a class. For me, if the opportunity to teach online comes again or continues, I would like to implement a different way of grading. If I ask students to submit video projects, then I can return their feedback in a video format as well. Rather than being a power on the other side of a screen, I want my students to be able to see me as their learning assistant. The online setting allows teachers to inadvertently limit their interactions with students. There is no need to limit my interactions with students in favor of creating more time for them to interact with each other. Both can and should co-exist. My role as a teacher is a facilitator of education, and if I limit the amount of time I have to encourage students with advice and learning assistance in the classroom, then I limit their willingness to connect with me as their educator.

CONCLUSION

Online teaching cannot possibly hold a candle to a traditional classroom, especially when it comes to forming relationships with students. However, despite this difficulty and the barrier of the screen, it is imperative that educators try their utmost to bond with their students and become someone who the students can trust. Ideally, this connection will not only raise the morale of the class, but also to give students the support they need from their teachers. Acknowledging that student-teacher relationships cannot be something that we simply allow to have less importance in an online setting will allow us, as educators, to encourage students to rise to the educational occasion and become more prepared and autonomous learners (Gillespie, 2005).

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