

EDITORIAL

Enhancing Student Engagement: The Power of Relationship-rich Education

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“Relationships are the beating heart of the undergraduate experience.”
(Felten & Lambert, 2021, p.1)

Many parts of the world have now moved into a post-COVID era. Restrictions on social distance are largely relaxed, and students and teachers can meet in a face-to-face environment again. However, COVID-19 has changed people’s perceptions. For example, many students have become familiar with and accustomed to virtual and hybrid platforms, resulting in doubts about the necessity of returning to the university campus in person (Penn, 2022). Educators at all levels face new opportunities and challenges to connect with students and engage them effectively. It is, therefore, a critical time to rethink student engagement.

Reschly and Christenson (2022) define student engagement as “students’ active participation in academic and co-curricular or school-related activities and commitment to educational goals and learning” (p. 4). Engaging students requires energy and effort. In particular, students’ relationships with teachers, peers, and their schools play a pivotal role (Reschly & Christenson, 2022). Decades of research have already demonstrated the power of relationships in creating transformative university experiences. Based on interviews with 385 undergraduates and teachers and visits to 16 campuses of higher education institutions in the US, Felten and Lambert (2021) conclude that a relationship-rich environment is a central factor to student success. Though Felten and Lambert conducted their study in the early period of the COVID-19 pandemic, they already suggested that relationship-rich education would probably help strengthen connections after the pandemic.

With the promising power of relationship-rich education, some questions to consider include: In what ways can we adopt the concept of relationship-rich education to engage students in a post-COVID era, in which hybrid, flexible, and personalised ways of learning are increasingly appreciated? What are the important elements of a relationship-rich learning environment in a post-COVID era?

The five contributions in Issue 12(2) of AJSOTL have offered valuable insights into several aspects of the above questions. Zhou’s paper synthesises various streams of literature on student engagement and provides an integrated framework. One pedagogical implication of the framework is to design social support that rewards ‘reciprocity, attachment and fellow-feeling’. Christabelle and Musib’s empirical study compares students’ perceptions of online and face-to-face learning and records mixed results. While they appreciated the greater flexibility and autonomy in online learning, students also found it difficult to build social relationships with their classmates. The findings suggested a hybrid mode of teaching and learning to be adopted to maintain the advantages of online learning while allowing more networking opportunities.

With a commitment to enhance students’ motivation and engagement in learning, Khoo, Chen, and De Jong designed interventions that reconsider ways of interacting with, advising, and supporting music students. In their study, a buddy system and revised academic advising strategies have been included in the series of interventions to strengthen relationship building with students. Echoing the importance of faculty working together to develop relationship-rich education (Felten & Lambert, 2021), Lee, Wu, Wai-Cook, and Ong illustrate how interdisciplinary collaboration between faculty members creates an integrated learning environment in which students receive coordinated support and comments on their learning of academic literacy and disciplinary contents. In this way, the learning processes become more relevant and personalised to students with various abilities. Finally, Leung’s Reflection shares practices of engaging students in adopting different scholarly positions to solve ill-structured problems. Accordingly, the diverse perspectives formed among students on a particular issue will manifest in classroom discussions and peer review exercises, which ultimately benefit all students in their learning.

The five contributions in the current issue of AJSOTL respond to a range of possibilities for leveraging relationship-rich education to enhance student engagement. Relationships can be nurtured between students and learning contents and processes, between students and teachers, and among students themselves. Based on these commendable achievements, we can consider embracing more relationship-rich education in the post-COVID time. Meanwhile, it is also anticipated that unique challenges might be encountered in Asian regions where a larger power distance between teachers and students is observed. For example, students as partners as a relationship-rich educational practice has not flourished in this part of the world. There is still much to be done before we achieve relationship-rich education, and this issue hopefully would offer some initial thoughts.

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