

# The Human Student: The Essentiality of the Teacher-Student Connection in Higher Education

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## ABSTRACT

Higher education institutions are investing significant effort into the improvement of student success, retention and satisfaction. Some effort is being expended in research seeking to understand influencing factors, but the majority of effort is directed towards improving teaching quality. Effort to improve teaching quality is characterised by professional development initiatives, the general aim being to facilitate the shift away from traditional teacher-centred approaches, towards student-centred approaches. Though these initiatives are useful there exists an omission (or at the very least an area of severe-under-emphasis) within the discourse surrounding teaching quality in higher education – explicit attention to the teacher-student connection. The premise of the present article is that to make greater inroads into bettering student experiences and outcomes, the teacher-student connection, along with the humanist perspective in which it is embedded, is integral to the quality teaching practice in higher education.

## KEYWORDS

Active Learning, Constructivism, Hierarchy of Needs, Higher Education, Humanism, Quality Teaching, Student Experience, Student Retention, Teacher-Student Relationship

## INTRODUCTION

The themes of student satisfaction, success and retention reverberate loudly throughout institutions of higher education around the world. Effort to fulfil the mission of ‘gaining the edge’ in student success, retention and satisfaction is precipitating a great deal of activity within higher education: programs of study are being evaluated and revised; courses and teaching practices are being subjected to scrutiny as never before; the myriad of factors that influence student success and retention are being researched; and significant investment is being made into raising the quality of teaching by building teaching staff capabilities in student-centred learning, online learning, flipped classrooms, and a host of other ‘innovative’ teaching strategies. In hallway conversations among teaching staff it is not uncommon to hear concern about how to get students to come to class, how to build students’ academic skills, and how to get students to engage with assessment. Most recently, in the author’s home institution, active learning has become a high-profile concept. Numerous staff development workshops have been initiated, and an ‘active learning’ lecture capture platform has been implemented. High on the learning and teaching agenda is the institution wide uptake of active learning as a teaching approach

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impacting positively on student experiences, success and outcomes. Amid the intense activity and discourse surrounding student satisfaction, success and retention, there exists a stark omission (or at least an area of severe under-emphasis) - the teacher-student connection.

Interestingly, although the teacher-student connection is neglected in higher education teaching, in Pre-K to 12 education the teacher-student connection receives a significant degree of attention and has been well researched (Bernstein, Yamashiro, & Nonan, 2013). In the domain of formal schooling, the crucial role played by positive teacher-student connections in helping to achieve high learner engagement and positive learning outcomes is often acknowledged (e.g. Liberante, 2012; Gallagher, 2013). It is often argued that during the years of formal schooling the teacher-student connection warrants particular attention because in the younger years, children are still developing, and so they have a strong need for nurture. Indeed, much of the literature around teacher-student connection is positioned in the earlier years of schooling, and is often aligned with attachment theories relevant to child development, and linked with facilitating students' social and academic development (Gallagher, 2013). But, positive teacher-student connections have a significant impact on student learning outcomes regardless of age and thus there is no reason why attention to the quality of teacher-student relationships should be limited to young students in their formal years of schooling. Grounded in humanist theory, a positive teacher-student connection is vital to the success of student-centred learning approaches across educational domains, higher education included. Strong teacher-student connection impacts positively on student motivation, boosts confidence, improves academic self-efficacy and ultimately plays an important role in students' successful achievement of academic outcomes (Markle & O'Banion, 2014).

In the domain of higher education discussion of teaching quality often revolves around constructivism. Featuring in higher education teaching professional development initiatives, constructivism is a well-recognised and often cited educational theory, but its co-requisite, humanism, in which the teacher-student connection is situated is not nearly so well acknowledged. The intent with which the present article is written is to bring humanism and the embodied notion of teacher-student connection, into the discussion of quality teaching in higher education. It is argued that if we are to make inroads into better student experience, greater student success, and higher levels of retention, then establishing a positive teacher-student connection should, and must, be integral to quality teaching in higher education.

Given that the teacher-student connection is grounded in humanist theory, prior to embarking on further discussion of the importance of the teacher-student connection in higher education teaching, it is useful to very briefly consider the foundational concepts of humanist theory.

## **HUMANISM AT A GLANCE**

Distinct from behaviourism with its emphasis on behaviour and operant conditioning, and distinct from the notion of knowledge discovery and learning as construction of meaning, found in cognitivism, humanism pivots on the principles of human relatedness and the human need for relationships to others. As a paradigm, humanism taps into ideas about human dignity, potential empowerment and freedom. Humanist theory espouses a view of the world not from the perspective of others, but from the subjective standpoint of the individual. Humanist practitioners seek to understand how each individual perceives and interprets phenomena. Thus, humanism is about conscious experience. Importantly, humanism positions people not as helpless 'victims' of circumstance or simply reacting to 'stimulus', but rather as creative and active agents able to overcome adversity.

People, according to the humanist perspective are essentially good. They are innately driven by the need for self-improvement. Each individual's need for continued growth, improvement and fulfilment is captured in the notion of self-actualisation. As defined by Maslow (1943), self-actualisation refers to the human need to realize one's full potential, to be fulfilled and to do all they are capable of

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