Attachment-Theory Based Pedagogy

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Abstract
There are a plethora of formal methods for educating undergraduate students, including recommendations for classroom management, concept presentation and assignment creation. What is often overlooked is the influence that student-instructor attachment might have on performance. On the primary and secondary levels there is evidence to support what we would assume to be true; that attachment does effect performance. We then assume that, to some degree, these findings would carry over to college-based instruction. Instructors have their preferred teaching styles (based on their personality types and learning styles), but regardless of the variations that exist and how well they correspond to student preferences, what is essential to learning is student motivation. Motivation could be influenced by a combination of factors, including inherent interest, career objectives, external pressures (i.e., parental expectation), and appropriate (based on skill level) complexity of assignments. This paper proposes that student motivation, and, therefore, performance, are also (on the secondary level) affected by student-instructor attachments. First, we discuss the results of attachment-theory research with K-12 students. Then we propose a (first) case where, on the secondary level, the student-teacher attachment should be explicitly (versus implicitly) developed/improved. Finally, we start to investigate methods that could eventually be formally evaluated for improving (healthy) student-teacher attachments, and, therefore, student performance, at the secondary level.

Keywords: Attachment-theory, Person-Centered teaching and learning,

1 Attachment in K-12

It's understood in K-12 education that the relationship between the teacher and the student impacts the degree and quality of learning. Dr. Marvin Marshall, in his article entitled "Learning and Relationships: The two are inseparable" [1] provided an illustrative scenario where, when students gave a teacher trouble, the response of the students responsible was that "the teacher did not like them". He claims that "when students harbor a visceral dislike, the teaching and learning suffer". Marshall recommends that teachers "encourage, empower, find an interest and build on it, be positive, develop procedures to help students help themselves". "Superior teachers", he states, "avoid stimulating students to have negative feelings toward them".

Peters & Le Cornu [2] argue for *constructivism* as a theoretical basis for student learning. The idea is that "the learner is active in the process of taking information and building knowledge and understanding". As they state, "central to constructivism is the notion that learners play an active role in constructing their own meaning." They argue for the "teachers moving away from the teacher centered conversations to ways of interacting with individual learners in … relation to a real problem they are solving". In studying several classrooms that applied the constructivist approach, the teachers in the study expressed the belief that the relationships that they have with each student (sic) are integral to a classroom culture that optimizes learning." The role of the instructor is to help each student develop self-directed learning skills as well as confidence in their own abilities. Of course, the authors acknowledge that "monitoring each student's progress and needs is problematic."

As the authors acknowledge in [2] "the relationship between teachers and students is a neglected area of computing education research." These authors cite several studies that link student's attitude toward the lectures/class with a positive relationship with the lecturer. They quoted one lecturer as saying, "if you want to be a good teacher, you really have to show the students . . . that you are passionate about the things you are teaching. The students can very quickly discover the fraud, so you must actually show your love of the material, if that comes across I think half the battle is won."

Riley [3] proposed that classroom dynamics are influenced by the attachment histories of not only the students, but also that of the teachers. In terms of the use of the word "attachment", the authors' state that "Attachment is the most comprehensive theory describing human relationships." The traditional assumption was that the teacher, as the "grown up." does not misbehave (they're professional and neutral), and if they do they are a "bad teacher"; the student, on the other hand, may misbehave due to their personal histories and/or current issues. Instead, Attachment-Theory proposes that attachment is between

individuals who each bring their own (often unconscious) assumptions and behaviors to the dynamic. In Riley's study, when teachers were able to recognize and understand their own attachment patterns then they were able to change negative classroom behaviors. Though formal Attachment Theory research has, thus far, only focused on K-12 education, we expect that unhealthy attachment-based behaviors exist in secondary education.

2 Attachment in Secondary education

Our objective in writing this initial concept paper on the role of attachment in secondary education is to:

a) Suggest a broadening of focus when we discuss pedagogical improvements; in addition to instructional methods, we should also suggest that instructors be mindful of their own (and students) potential attachment-based behaviors.
b) Propose future research that will provide a theoretical foundation to what we suggest to be true based on anecdotal evidence.
c) Solicit investigators who are interested in exploring this topic

As the Psychology researcher and author Bryne Brown highlights in her TED talk [3] what really matters to us as humans is connection with others; so either having or not having that connection with a student will impact overall influence and therefore, learning.

2.1 When Attachment Matters

In large research institutions student attachment with the primary instructor is neither likely nor valued by the institution, nor would it be expected from the students. Generally, the student would form attachments with the TA or the lab instructors; as these instructor stand-ins' are not first and foremost teachers (they are students, themselves), there is less expectation that they master the pedagogical tools, techniques and behaviors. To illustrate this point we consider the difference in expectations that a child has of its' parent versus the expectations that they would have of an older care-taking sibling.

At institutions (and within departments) where student retention is a concern, exceptional teaching is expected. When negative student-instructor attachment behaviors arise, the outcome could be poor student evaluations, decreased confidence on the part of the instructor and negative feelings toward students - which could then intensify the original behaviors. In the extreme case, this could lead to the replacement of the instructor; a loss of both the initial investment in their training, as well as the potential of having them as a successful contributor. This scenario may occur frequently; however, since attachment theory has not been addressed at the secondary level, we have no indication of its impact (financial, personal, departmental, etc.).

In research at the K-12 level, the humanist psychologist Carl Rogers [4] provided empirical support for the proposition that teacher-student relationships are fundamental to understanding classroom behavior by teachers as well as students and directly affects student outcomes. As one reviewer of the final unpublished writings of Rogers [4] states:

> *The principal finding of the research in this book show that teachers and schools can significantly improve their effectiveness through programs focusing on facilitative interpersonal relationships. Teachers who either naturally have, or are trained to have empathy, genuineness (congruence), and who prize their students (positive regard) create an important level of trust in the classroom and exert significant positive exert significant positive effects on student outcomes including achievement scores, interpersonal functioning, self-concept, attendance, and violence.*

We are finally realizing that other dimensions of pedagogy applied at the K-12 level have benefits in secondary education (active versus lecture-based learning); thus, we would expect that attachment theories could also improve teaching and learning in higher education.

2.1 Conditions for Attachments

The theories of person-centered teaching and learning [5] suggest that students learn best in an environment characterized by three attitudinal conditions (Table 1).

Table 1 - Attitudinal Conditions ideal for Person-Centered Pedagogy

Conditions	Synonyms
Congruence	Realness, genuineness, transparency, authenticity, openness
Acceptance	Respect, unconditional positive regard
Empathic Understanding	A deep understanding for the feelings and meanings of the other".

As Motschnig-Pitrik & Santos (2006) have pointed out, these attitudinal conditions "must be held and lived by the facilitators and communicated to the learners such that they actually perceive them and experience them as part of the teaching and learning relationship." Essentially, these conditions can give us a starting point for considering beneficial student-teacher attachments.

2.2 Cultivating Attachment

In the context of the traditional face-to-face lecture, educators with an extroverted personality type *may not need to explicitly* cultivate student-teacher attachments; they're natural openness would lead students to feel connected, even if the connection is only unidirectional. On the other

hand, educators with an introverted personality type, who would be less open in the public forum of a lecture, *may need to explicitly* cultivate attachments with individual students'. These educators may choose methods such as those shown in Table 2.

Table 2 - Methods for Cultivating Attachments

Method	Condition(s) to communicate
Personalized feedback on student work	Congruence
Initiate conversation before or after class with queries such as: "so how are you doing?"	Congruence, Acceptance, Empathic understanding
Allow time in class for students to be able to meet with the instructor individually	Congruence, Acceptance
Assign project-based journal entries (opportunity for instructor to see and respond to personality and individuality of students)	Congruence, Acceptance
Include student names in examples/exercises on the lecture.	Congruence, Acceptance
Contact with individual students (email) demonstrating concern over students' performance (not in a reprimanding way but a concerned way).	Congruence, Acceptance, Empathic Understanding

Admittedly, cultivating beneficial attachments[1] with individual students is an inexact science; it's a matter of being watchful for opportunities. For example, in a class of very quiet students, an instructor added student names to a lecture-based exercise (Figure 1). Subsequent to the presentation of the lecture the students listed in the illustration appeared to be more engaged in class.

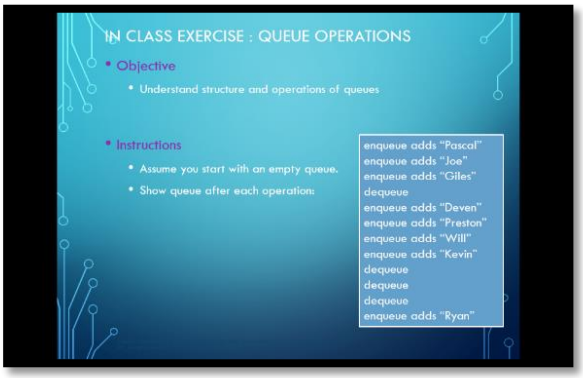

Figure 1 - Lecture with embedded student names

Certainly, the effect of these types of indirect student-teacher connections are hard to quantify; thus, we haven't yet tried to prove, definitively, that they enhanced student-teacher attachments (and therefore, learning). However, the anecdotal evidence from this example (and others like it) suggests that attachment-based pedagogy is an area worth exploring further.

3 Conclusions

In this paper we have suggested that at all educational levels (Higher-education as well as K-12):

1. Student motivation, and, therefore, performance, is affected by student-teacher attachments
2. Attachment-Theory based pedagogy[2] should be included in the development of all teachers.

In presenting our case, we first discussed the results of K-12 attachment-theory research that showed a strong correlation between student performance and instructor attachments. Then we discussed conditions for attachments based on person-centered teaching and learning research. Finally, we provided a (not at all comprehensive) list of example methods for cultivating student-teacher attachments.

4 Future Work

As this was a concept paper, the next challenging step is to demonstrate a definitive correlation between employed methods (to explicitly cultivate attachment) and student performance.

5 References

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