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Context Matters: Enhancing SoTL by Exploring Interpersonal Relationship Building in Higher Education

ABSTRACT

This paper contributes to SoTL by critically examining the literature on the nature of interpersonal relationships across global higher education settings through narrative inquiry, focusing on both online and in-person learning. Drawing on previous literature (to show patterns of inquiry) and fictional student cases (to give concrete details and examples), this paper examines how educators' relationships with students shape learning outcomes and experiences and looks at the intricate role of trust in fostering interpersonal relationships within educational settings. The impact of trust is examined across various dimensions—from student-teacher dynamics to peer interactions and institutional structures. Key themes of deliberate interaction, clear communication, and activities for belonging emerge as crucial for fostering supportive learning environments. The analysis underscores the significance of empathetic communication and culturally responsive pedagogies in enhancing student engagement and well-being. Trust, foundational to all those themes, is analyzed through lenses of honesty and benevolence, two essential perspectives for establishing reliable educational environments for students from a variety of societal and educational backgrounds. Through the fictionalized cases, the authors investigate how trust, as cultivated through reflective practices such as the 5Rs framework (Bain et al. 2002), enhances student engagement and inclusivity. By integrating personal reflections and scholarly literature from SoTL, this paper advocates for pedagogical practices that prioritize inclusive, relational approaches in education across diverse contexts.

KEYWORDS

relationship building, trust, reflection, belonging, narrative inquiry

INTRODUCTION

The evidence-based, systematic, public facing analysis and enhancement of teaching and learning are some of the core defining principles of SoTL (Felten 2013; Kern et al. 2015). Furthermore, to undertake good SoTL, we must also understand the mechanisms that mediate teaching and learning in higher education contexts. As Felten and Lambert (2020) claim, relationships between students-and-students as well as students-and-educators are some of the most important mechanisms for (and thus have a profound impact on) learning. Meaningful interpersonal

relationships contribute significantly towards better student engagement, motivation, sense of belonging, and overall positive academic experience (Felten and Lambert 2020)—not just for students, but also for educators (Blake, Capper, and Jackson 2022; Gravett and Ajjawi 2022). Positive relationships between educators and students have a direct impact on academic performance (Arminio and Torres 2012), with students who feel a sense of connection and support more likely to be engaged in their studies, attend classes regularly, and demonstrate higher levels of motivation. In short, "relationships are the beating heart" (Felten and Lambert 2020, 1) of the student experience, and indeed the broader experience of teaching and learning in higher education.

This paper examines how the key factors of interpersonal relationship building between educators and students influence student learning and experiences in diverse higher education settings. The paper contributes to SoTL by critically exploring the literature on the nature of interpersonal relationships across global higher education in order to suggest implementable takeaways for instructors and administrators, as well as next steps for inquiry by SoTL practitioners. We highlight that context really does matter in building interpersonal relationships and the ways in which this can be achieved are inherently dependent upon each student's situation.

Each of the authors in this paper are higher education professionals from a range of different countries (Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States of America), working in a broad range of contexts. For the authors, teaching and learning, and supporting those practices, takes place everywhere: classrooms, labs, and field-based learning, in both blended and solely online learning contexts. We bring our wide range of experiences as teachers and learners, driven by critical self-reflection, enabling us to situate our own experiences at the heart of this inquiry; and drawing our firsthand experiences of interpersonal relationship building into conversation with one another. As scholars of SoTL, we align with Shulman (2002) as he describes how SoTL focused academics always ". . . examine the quality of those (pedagogical) practices and ask how they could have been even more effective. Scholars of teaching and learning are prepared to confront the ethical as well as the intellectual and pedagogical challenges of their work. . . . They insist on stopping at the scene to see what more they can do" (viii). We argue that attending to interpersonal relationships is a vital part of these confrontations, because understanding the ethical, intellectual, and pedagogic challenges of relationship building enables practitioners to be "even more effective" (ibid.) in their SoTL.

ANALYZING RELATIONSHIP BUILDING THROUGH NARRATIVE INQUIRY–METHODOLOGY

Methods

To meet our aim, we use the approach of narrative inquiry through communal autoethnographic fictional student cases developed by the authors of this paper to represent an amalgamation of student characteristics and contexts we have witnessed over years of teaching. Narrative inquiry is a qualitative methodology that traditionally uses participant stories to bring understanding of how participants experience a phenomenon. Several scholars have demonstrated how the writing of fictional, semi-fictional, and/or ethnographically informed narratives can be incredibly powerful to help materialize and realize high-level academic challenges (Clough 2002; Richardson and St. Pierre 2005). In the case of our analysis, we began with a review of the literature around interpersonal relationship building in higher education, and this quickly highlighted a number of interconnected themes. We selected literature from previously known sources as well as contemporary sources to most aptly explore the created student cases. The literature ranges from 1978 to the present day. Based on the reviewed literature, we identified central themes: interaction, communication, and belonging; trust; disciplinary influence; reflection; and socio-material relations. Our lived experiences in the classroom show that although these themes can be teased out from a

literature review, this is less straightforward in practice. Students learn and interrelate with one another and their instructors differently, shaped by their own unique personal circumstances, the nature of the class, the cohort, the curriculum, the institution, and more. Rather than simply reproduce a standard literature review to synthesize a broad array of published material in multiple databases, we sought to capture and explore more targeted complexities by structuring our analysis through the lens of fictional student cases that explore learning in both in-person and online learning environments.

Drawing from our experiences of real-life relationship building in various teaching and learning settings, we have developed six amalgam fictional students whose experiences we draw upon to explore relevant literature, touching multiple facets of interpersonal relationships in order to come to a set of functional and constructive conclusions and recommendations for SoTL focused classroom practitioners and educators. Acknowledging and respecting the human behind the student identity, we include discussions around positionality and intersectionality when creating a common ground of understanding on which meaningful interpersonal relationships can be established. Interpersonal relationships are fluid and ever-changing; therefore, context matters. This integral component to SoTL is a guiding principle in teaching and learning relationships.

Scope and limitations

We have named our fictional students, but we emphasize that they are composites of people and situations we have encountered throughout our varied careers and do not represent any single person. Moreover, we acknowledge that our positionality in institutions from the global north and Australia shapes our student cases in a specific way, and it is important to emphasize that our approach is not intended to be universalizing or homogenizing. We explicitly recognize that relationship building will always be contextual and specific. We hope that we have brought our fictional students to life with enough detail to understand their contexts and specifics and for their stories to be a heuristic tool through which to effectively explore the literature.

Key factors we considered in choosing elements of each student's story to share include:

a) Disciplinary conventions, broadly framed (e.g. humanities and social sciences, applied sciences, business, and pre-professional fields)—in each of these areas, students have to navigate not only course content but different expectations from educators based upon norms in that discipline, as well as historical trends (such as the predominance of male students and instructors in STEM fields, for example).
b) Gender identity.
c) Cultural and/or linguistic background/heritage and connection to place of education.
d) Other identity markers or life realities, including but not limited to neurodiversity and family responsibilities.

For each of the fictional student examples, we have emphasized the factors that have the greatest impact upon their educational experiences.

This methodological approach has limitations. Although the autoethnographic fictional student cases provided room for rich discussion on a variety of significant issues, they represent student stories perceived by the authors (as educators), potentially leaving out aspects from the student perspective. Additionally, the limited number of cases presented cannot encompass all contextual variations to relationship building in higher education. We offer this work as a starting point for discussion and application to unique learning experiences across the world.

UNDERSTANDING INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIP BUILDING

Interaction, communication, and belonging

To begin our review, we introduce the first two fictional cases, online student Roddy and on-campus student Kit.

Roddy: Male, second year of a four-year online undergraduate program, traditionally aged student, art major (textiles), native Spanish speaker, recently diagnosed with ADHD.

Roddy is an international student from El Salvador majoring in art. In addition to being a multilingual student for whom English (the language primarily used at his university) is a third language, Roddy was recently diagnosed with ADHD (attention deficit hyperactivity disorder) by his doctor and has requested accommodations via the campus accessibility services office. Roddy feels embarrassed by the diagnosis but was advised to provide an accommodation letter to his educators at the beginning of the semester, which he has not yet shared. Although Roddy likes the flexibility of online learning, he finds it challenging to stay on task in the online environment. He lives in shared accommodation with another international student who also takes online classes, and class times often overlap, creating more distractions. Roddy often comes to office hours to discuss assignments and make sure he understands class content. He enjoys telling his educators about his life in El Salvador and finds he connects more with educators than students his own age.

Kit: Non-binary (they/them), first-gen, mature age/non-traditional student, on-campus master's student in education administration.

Kit is a mature age student returning to their university studies after many years. They have the responsibility of aging parents and school-age children. Time management remains one of their biggest challenges and they struggle to get to class on time in the morning. Just a few weeks into the semester, Kit is feeling uncertain about their course and realizes how classroom teaching has changed over time, especially as they have been a teacher themselves. They are the first in their family to go to university. Though they could manage as an undergraduate student in the past, as a postgraduate student, the world of higher education seems vastly different from anything they have ever experienced, and they are more aware than ever of the "hidden curriculum." On top of that, they cannot spend as much time as they wish to on campus, connecting with fellow students and staff. They have started feeling quite alienated. Since they value camaraderie, on days when Kit does not have to rush back to collect the children from school or take their mother to a medical appointment, they really enjoy being able to have coffee with those in their course. Some of their fellow students can understand the challenges, and it helps them to lean into peer support which is valuable in terms of engagement and encouragement. Nonetheless, balancing between study load and the responsibilities of parents and children adds to their stress and time management challenges. In addition, the processes for applying for extra support from the university, like extensions to work, are so onerous that they feel like another barrier, not an enabler. Therefore, they feel greatly supported when some of their lecturers have been

empathetic and acknowledge their anxieties, their lack of experience, and everything they must juggle at home.

The cases of Roddy and Kit provide an important starting point in highlighting some of the fundamental elements of interpersonal relationship building in higher education: interaction, communication, and belonging. Social interaction and collaboration shape and test meanings and help individuals construct greater understanding. This means that interaction and communication are key to fostering interpersonal relationships in diverse teaching and learning environments. Felten and Lambert (2020) acknowledge how, regardless of whether it is within physical or virtual teaching and learning settings, constructive interactions contribute positively toward student learning, motivation, and overall well-being. However, at times, challenges arise when communicating and collaborating with individuals from diverse backgrounds. We might compare this to wearing the wrong reading glasses, which can be helpful to recognize vague shapes but the details and nuances continue to be blurry or elusive. This can lead to confusion, frustration, and even distress, especially when pedagogical methods appear conflicting. We see this in these two cases: in online modalities, where Roddy, who is from El Salvador, struggles to connect with domestic students in his cohort, while the challenges of Kit's domestic life alienate them from others in their cohort. The solution lies in donning "cultural spectacles." That is by viewing situations through the lenses of positionality and intersectionality, we can develop a mindset which creates common ground between the differing perceptions.

The importance of listening and responding to students' needs as a part of caring behavior upon which interpersonal relationships are built is developed by Noddings (2012) who argues that, although there are assumed needs within the established curriculum, it is the educator's job to listen for the expressed needs of students. Noddings (2012) also highlights that educators should be aware and thoughtful about how they respond to students' unexpressed needs. It is important to ask questions, reflect, engage in dialogue, and resist the urge to simply say, "I know how you feel." The climate of care, where educators can impart knowledge while meeting individual needs (Noddings 2012), can improve the education provided, ultimately serving as the foundation for everything else that happens in the learning space. We see the value of this in Kit's experiences of feeling less alienated when their lecturers recognize their learning needs and provide them with techniques for mitigating anxiety. Equally, mechanisms for Roddy to build rapport with his educators are vital for engagement, reflecting Glazier's (2016) work. Glazier's study of online learning environments demonstrated that rapport between students and the educator was key for preventing students dropping out of their online classes. Martin (2019) concurs with this view and notes that online teaching can lead to a disconnect between educator and student when they cannot "see" their educator, which in turn can cause students to disengage from their learning.

Ultimately, belonging is a key dimension of interpersonal relationship building and achieving student success. There is a large and growing body of research linking student's sense of belonging to their experiences of higher education and academic outcomes (Ahn and Davis 2020; Blake, Capper, and Jackson 2022; Pedler, Willis, and Nieuwoudt 2022; Thomas and Tights 2011), underscoring the importance for institutions to examine both their policies and culture around belonging, in particular as they relate to learners who are marginalized and face the most inequities in higher education. Moreover, although institutional culture might cleave different scales of interaction, communication, and belonging apart, interpersonal relationship building is multi-scalar. Interpersonal relationships on the small scale are intimately connected to fostering a sense of belonging, and the disciplinary or institutional context is the place through which many policies that influence this play out.

A sense of belonging in a higher education context can emerge from a range of interpersonal relationships, which may often seem to be on a small scale, but this can also be nurtured when there is an alignment between student's own experiences, practices, and beliefs, and those prevalent within an institution (DeRosa and Dolby 2014). This is influenced not only by relationships fostered in educational settings, be they online or in-person, but also by the institution's policies and culture. As higher education enters a precarious period, where education is commodified and neoliberal policies prioritize selling education rather than sharing freely, there is a critical need for close attention and scrutiny in order to ensure that institutional policies and culture do not alienate their own students. Open and inclusive teaching policies, for instance, could make Kit and Roddy feel valued and part of the learning community, rather than feeling as though they must disclose personal information about their learning needs in order to be accommodated.

When institutional policies and culture further alienate learners who have been historically, persistently, or systematically marginalized, there is a greater risk of attrition (Larsen and James 2022, Pedler, Willis, and Nieuwoudt 2022). Alienation results not only from existing policies, but from who is more directly categorized as a valued member of tertiary institutions. When institutions value learners from affluent backgrounds, learners who do not share similar capital or habitus (Bourdieu 1990) find themselves trivialized or lacking the "appropriate" lived experiences (DeRosa and Dolby 2014), something evidenced in our case of Kit, as a first-generation student, and of Roddy, who feels both pressure and discomfort about sharing his ADHD diagnosis. Institutions can circumvent such outcomes by creating policies that diversify the student body to include those with diverse lived experiences, providing extra support around the "hidden curriculum." The "hidden curriculum" is defined by Koutsouris, Mountford-Zimdars, and Dingwall (2021, 132) as being "the unintended messages, underpinning norms, values and assumptions that are often so unquestioned that they have become invisible." This includes aspects such as an institution's policies and practices. To truly create a culture where all students feel included, a shift is needed in how institutional spaces are set-up, programs are revitalized, and diverse identities are embedded and celebrated as fundamental to institutional culture.

Disciplinary influence

Maria: Female, first-gen, first year of a primarily online four-year undergraduate program, traditionally aged student, engineering major, history minor.

Maria is a traditionally aged female first-generation university student majoring in engineering with a minor in history. Maria's family has sacrificed a lot of their savings to help send her to university, so she feels pressure to succeed and make them proud. She is still acclimating to the changes between secondary education and this new university environment, as no family members have previously attended university and are thus unable to show her aspects of the "hidden curriculum." Maria struggles with self-confidence and feels as though she doesn't really belong. Although Maria has made friends in her on-campus university housing, she struggles to connect to her online engineering cohort, primarily composed of male students and primarily taught by male educators. She is a diligent student, but doesn't often engage in the online classroom, because she lacks confidence in her own abilities and feels that others have more extensive knowledge. That said, she always feels much more comfortable to contribute and be herself on online discussion boards, which comprise a smaller group of people

and a different way of communicating, enabling a more personalized sense of communication.

Constructing robust relationships built upon a foundation of trust and shared educational goals between instructors and students stands as a linchpin for fostering a positive and conducive learning environment in all disciplines at the university level. The most fruitful of these relationships transcend the conventional teacher-student dynamic, playing a pivotal role in academic success, personal development, and overall well-being. Although applicable to all disciplines, the cultivation of critical thinking and communication skills is paramount in disciplines like the humanities and social sciences (Rahman and Lakey 2023), and fostering trust and openness becomes particularly vital. Educators can create an inclusive and respectful classroom environment by encouraging diverse perspectives and providing constructive feedback on written assignments as well as through other learning methods (Goldschmidt 2014). This not only helps students develop analytical abilities but also ensures they feel supported in their academic journey. Similarly, in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) disciplines, relationship building is equally transformative, particularly in large enrollment courses (Cooper et al. 2017).

Reflecting on Maria's experiences, it is important to not only consider how inclusivity is being approached, but how the online classroom climate is being cultivated. Maria feels like she belongs in small group settings, but larger settings appear to be unwelcoming. As Cooper et al. (2017) suggest, students need to feel acknowledged both in the classroom and one-to-one settings. Students may find "cold calling," especially in a large enrollment course, anxiety inducing, but adding techniques such as "warm calling" (where the students have time within class in order to prepare/consider answers prior to being asked to participate) and combining office hour conversations with course lectures, when appropriate, make it clear that student input is clearly valued by the educator (Metzger and Via 2022). Gestures such as these have allowed Maria to feel more comfortable in her online classes and adjust to cultural differences, impacting her overall comfort level. Educators also inspire passion for their subject by making complex concepts accessible, offering practical examples, and providing opportunities for hands-on learning (deBraga, Boyd, and Abdulnour 2015). Personalized guidance in STEM disciplines is essential for helping students navigate the challenges of rigorous coursework and develop problem-solving skills, something we see in Maria's narrative, where online discussion boards and direct responses to her input provide a sense of personalization that she does not get from her larger classes.

Regardless of the discipline, educators can enhance relationships by being approachable and demonstrating genuine interest in their students' success. Understanding unique learning needs and adapting teaching methods accordingly is crucial, as seen in one study of undergraduate students in the field of history (Corley 2013). Identifying bottlenecks within a specific discipline where students get "stuck" and may need assistance beyond the classroom is crucial to creating productive and meaningful relationships (Middendorf and Shopkow 2018). Educators who are accessible beyond the classroom through office hours, email, or virtual platforms create an environment where students feel comfortable seeking clarification and guidance.

Beyond academics, relationship building contributes to students' holistic development. Educators serve as mentors, offering insights into career paths, guidance on research opportunities, and connections with resources within and outside the university; students are empowered when faculty take time and get to know them well enough to see their potential (McKinsey 2016). This mentorship helps students develop "soft skills" such as time management, effective communication, and collaboration—attributes crucial in any professional setting (Reinarz and White 2001). This does

come with caveats; research also demonstrates the importance of identities in shaping students' views of staff. Bingham et al. (2021) report that undergraduates in a biology course co-taught by both a male and a female instructor are more likely to make contact outside of class with a female instructor rather than a male instructor, which mirrors other studies suggesting students perceive females as more approachable and caring (Tatum et al. 2013), In turn, this can place an unfair burden of pastoral care upon female educators. Furthermore, in disciplines that have predominantly male educators, female students may find themselves more alienated than their male peers, as in the case with Maria.

Trust

Trust is intimately connected to, and emerges from interaction, communication, belonging, and disciplinary influence. We frame our discussion of this core element of interpersonal relationship building with the introduction of two more students, Zarah and Aiden, both studying on-campus courses. In each of these cases, issues raised in the previous sections resonate, and we use this to explore how they connect to trust.

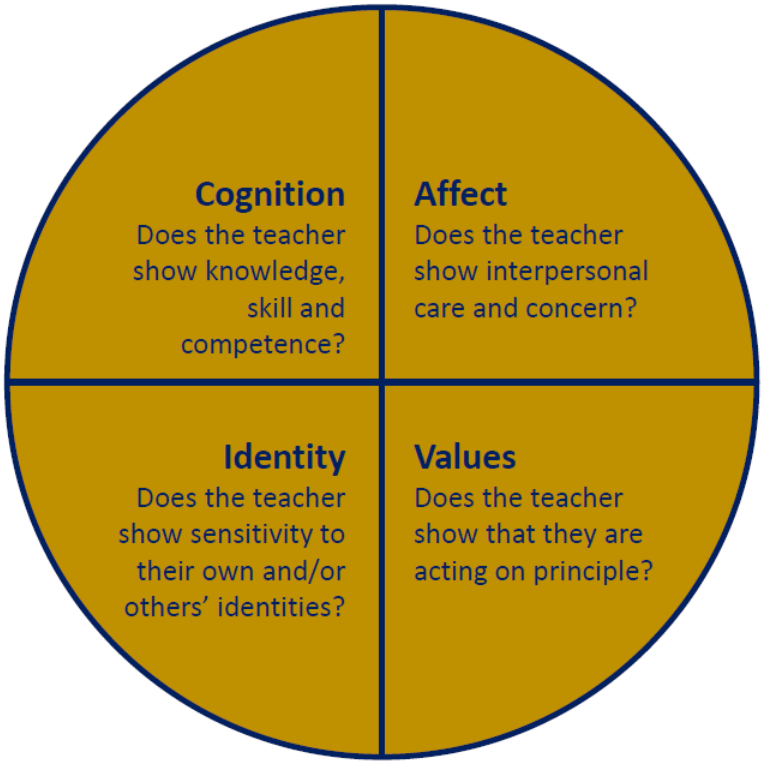
> **Zarah:** Female, transfer student, lower socioeconomic status, transitioned to University X in the third year of a four-year undergraduate program, social science major, undecided minor.
>
> Zarah began her post-secondary journey at a community college. Though she was offered a partial scholarship to attend the major university in her area, she opted to start at the community college with a scholarship due to financial concerns. She chose this option because the community college, known for its small classes, was well regarded for nurturing and preparing students to transfer to universities to complete the final two years of their undergraduate degree. After spending two years there, Zarah has transferred to University X to complete her undergraduate degree. At the university, things are markedly different. At her former college, she knew the professors well and classes were small, so she felt seen, heard, and visible. On the contrary, here the lecture theater is enormous, with over 150 students in the room. Three weeks into the semester, it is hard not to feel anonymous in this space. Zarah feels students are not reflected in the curriculum and teaching practices. Teaching staff hardly know any of the students by name, and it is hard to connect with other students. Moreover, Zarah feels that there is not much space to get to know other students, understand their personal ideals, visions, and goals, what makes them tick, or to create relationships that engage all participants. These all add to her feeling a lack of sense of belonging. Such disconnectedness also contributes to the lack of enthusiasm and engagement for learning. She feels adrift and lacks guidance from advisors or older students in her program, since she has just arrived at this university, and no one has reached out to her after her initial registration appointment.
>
> **Aiden:** Male, second year of a four-year undergraduate program, traditionally aged student, psychology major, no current minor, neurodiverse, and dyslexic.
>
> Because of Aiden's learning needs, he has received some financial aid from the university which was a great incentive for him to enroll. A few weeks into the semester,

> he has realized how having a supportive and empathetic teaching staff can contribute to his overall academic experience. One of his lecturers seems to have a great understanding of Aiden's needs. They make the accommodations which are needed to help Aiden feel welcomed in the classroom and foster active participation. Most crucially, this educator has taken up a universal design for learning (UDL) informed perspective in their teaching practices so Aiden does not have to constantly ask for accommodations or "out himself" in front of his classmates. The student-centric learning methods are inclusive and cater for all students with diverse needs. Because of the efficient use of the learning management system/virtual learning environment, the assigned course materials are clearly available in a variety of formats - readings, podcasts with transcripts, and videos (with closed captioning and transcripts) for students to use at their convenience. Aiden appreciates being able to listen to materials in an audio format as this corresponds with his preferred way of learning. In addition, a flipped classroom teaching style helps Aiden to understand the content better, construct his thoughts and opinions, and eventually take an active role in the classroom. As students are heard, all students, including Aiden, feel that they are being taken seriously, and they are included in teaching practices.

The cases of Zarah and Aiden provide contrasting examples of how trust can be established and diminished. In Aiden's case, excellent interaction and communication initiate trust, while in Zarah's narrative, the lack of these elements act as barriers to trust. Given that this complex interplay lies at the heart of all relationships, Felten, Forsyth, and Sutherland's (2023) review of the literature about trust in the classroom has highlighted that this work has been relatively sparse and has not been updated with the current ways that higher education teachers practice. To evaluate these models, they undertook an extensive study of higher education teachers, exploring what "moves" (actions or behaviors) they employed to establish trust. They then coded the interviews using existing trust models—specifically the model devised by Mayer, Davis, and Schoorman (1995) which defines trust as being established through ability, integrity, and benevolence, and the model devised by Jones and George (1998) which defines trust moves as cognitive-, affective-, and moral-based. Yet as their analysis progressed, they found that neither model quite fit the way contemporary higher education teachers establish trust (Felten, Forsyth, and Sutherland 2023). In some cases, they noted that trust moves could fall under multiple categories from both models. In other instances, such as Jones and George's moral-based moves, they demonstrated that concepts, language, and practice had developed in the three decades since the model was proposed. For the latter specifically, Felten, Forsyth, and Sutherland (2023) identified that value-based moves now more closely matched discourse in higher education than moral-based moves.

As their work progressed, Felten, Forsyth, and Sutherland (2023) developed a new model. Drawing in parts of previous scholarship, but also informed by their own analysis of teacher-initiated trust moves, they developed a four-fold model identifying trust moves as falling under the categories of cognition-based, affect-based, identity-based, and values-based (Figure 1). Felten, Forsyth, and Sutherland (2023, 6) note that "[al]though clear lines separate the four in this figure, we assume there might be movement between and overlap among the dimensions in actual teaching practice."

Figure 1. A conceptual model for teacher-initiated trust moves (Felten et al. 2023)



The model they devised offers a conceptual model for a range of implementations:

> . . . to encourage discussion about the role of trust in the higher education classroom, . . . as a heuristic for planning, teaching, and reflecting on courses, prompting analysis of the ways a teacher could (or does) attempt to generate trusting classroom interactions. . . . [and] for SoTL scholars and academic developers who are inquiring into and helping colleagues build trust in the classroom. (Felten, Forsyth, and Sutherland 2023, 7)

Trust is often at the heart of any interpersonal relationships, not only between teacher and student, but between student and student and between student and the structures of their day-to-day learning, such as online platforms and physical spaces of learning. Snijders et al. (2020) also indicated the significance of trust in relationships as it informs two of their five dimensions in their relationship quality scale for higher education: trust in honesty and trust in benevolence. Trust in honesty is based on the students' belief that educators, support staff, and their institution are sincere and can be trusted to reliably deliver effective education. Trust in benevolence is the idea that educators genuinely care about students' success and wellbeing.

Trust is a complex aspect of building relationships in the learning environment, yet as our cases show, the curation of learning environments can significantly affect this. In Zarah's case, large class sizes leave her feeling alienated both from her lecturers and the rest of the class. Furthermore, what is valued in terms of curricular content also leaves Zarah feeling alienated, as she cannot see her lived experiences reflected in the learning materials. This is how Zarah's case reflects both (dis)trust in honesty in terms of her relationships with lecturers and peers, as well as (dis)trust of benevolence in terms of her feelings of detachment from the curricular content. On the other hand, when mutual trust is established through pedagogical practices, students like Aiden (despite being neurodiverse

and dyslexic) participate, invest, and engage more. Watson, McIntyre, and McArthur (2011) corroborate this, highlighting that trust is not only the case for "face-to-face" learning, but that it is "essential to successful transactions online" (23).

Reflection

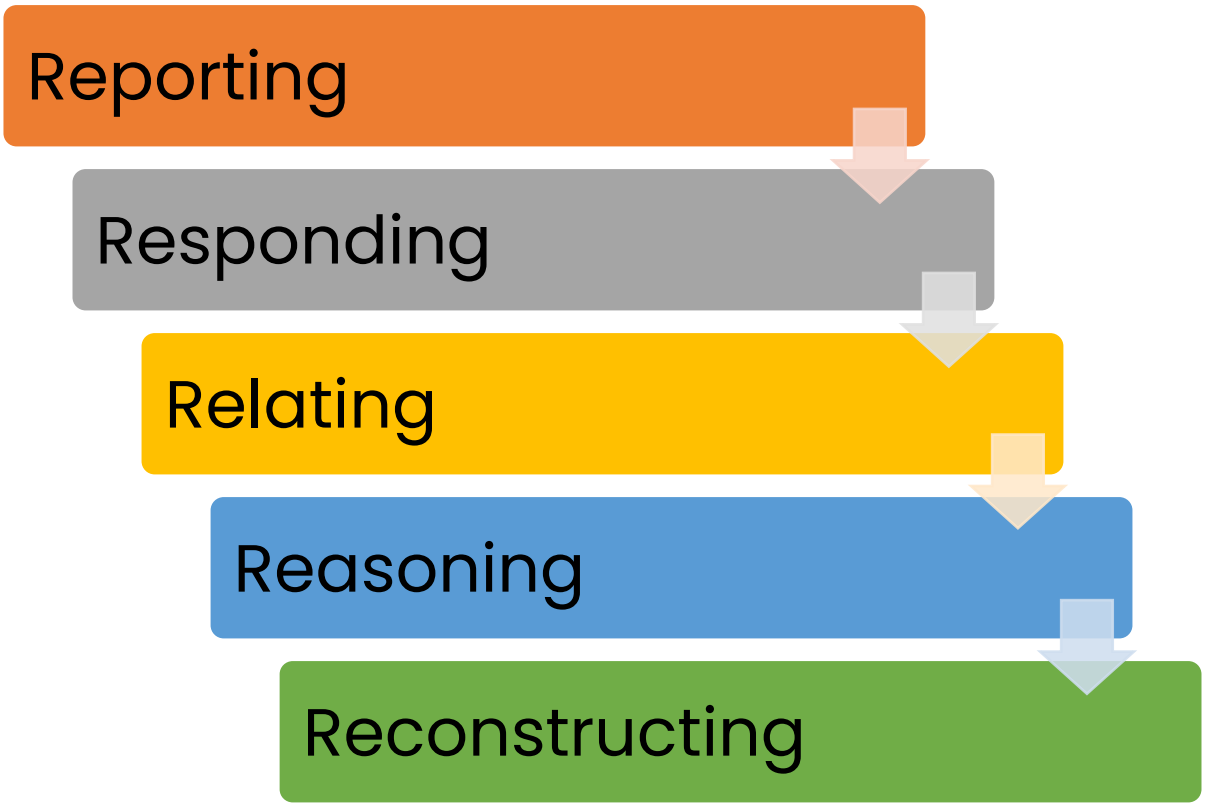
While trust is a widely recognized essential part of narratives on relationship building in teaching and learning, we use this penultimate section to suggest that reflective practice can also be of fundamental value. We begin this section with the case of Anna, for whom reflection is key to her learning and personal development.

> **Anna:** Female, mature aged student, third year on a four-year online undergraduate program, communications and marketing major, no minor
>
> Anna is a third-year mature student who is returning to finish her university degree after raising her children and supporting her family with full-time administrative work. She is a communications and marketing major and hopes to be promoted within her current company once she completes this degree. She has moved to part-time work in order to be able to take courses now that her children are teenagers and require less constant supervision. She takes the online course during her lunch break but keeps the camera off so that she can eat – this is helpful because her Wi-Fi at work is unreliable and keeping the camera off makes it more likely that the connection isn't broken. In her previous studies, she has never taken courses online, and so she feels a bit uncertain about some of the technologies that she is being asked to use, like the e-textbook platform and quizzes. However, many of the methods the course encourages are familiar to her. In her professional practice, she is encouraged to use reflection as a professional development tool, so creating reflective journals about her learning on this course have been a helpful way for her to see connections between professional and academic learning, development, and relationship building. Although not opposed to developing new relationships within the class, Anna already has a strong social support system in the local community with family and friends. Yet using reflective learning strategies has highlighted the benefits of getting to know her class and teacher to Anna, especially for projects that involve group work.

There are a range of reflective practice frameworks which are common throughout higher education (e.g., Gibbs 1988; Kolb 2014; Schön 1983). The 5Rs is a framework for reflection devised by Bain et al. (2002) in order to support student teachers in their reflective writing (Figure 2). The 5Rs within Bain's model are: Reporting refers to a description of the event; what was it that happened? Responding considers the feelings that the event has provoked, or observations of the event, with a view to this leading to identifying the problem or asking further questions to understand the issue. Relating requires connections to be made between the event that has happened, and previous experiences or similar events that have taken place—how can the event be explained by personal experience or pedagogical theory, and how can learning from this impact future similar events? Reasoning asks for consideration of the background or antecedent factors—are there intersecting factors that have impacted the situation, and how have underlying issues affected what has happened? Finally, Reconstructing requires the reframing or reconstruction of the situation. How

would this situation be addressed in future, based upon the learning from this reflection? What might impact whether this new plan would work or not?

Figure 2. The five stages of the 5Rs, based upon Bain et al (2002)



The 5Rs builds upon previous frameworks for reflection. For example, Schön (1983) identified two main forms of reflection: reflection-on-action and reflection-in-action. The former might be considered a more traditional reflection form; a person thinks back to a situation and considers how they might act differently next time—it takes place after the event. Reflection-in-action refers to reflection that occurs during an event and might cause a person to alter their plans or adapt during the event. Bain et al. (2002) consider that reflection-in-action is something that teachers and educators must do throughout their interactions with students.

While conceived as something of value for educators, we argue that the 5Rs provides a useful framework for both educators and learners. It enables them to reflect upon their own practice in various teaching and learning settings, to adjust aspects of the teaching and learning environment that are not working, and to enhance relationship building. Anna's case highlights how her reflective approach allows her to be more in-tune with her needs and to be agential in articulating and seeking out what she needs to be successful. Bain et al. (2002, 11) consider that "reflection should not be focused on 'just' the moral and ethical dilemmas of teaching, but on any matter of professional concern." It can, for instance, enhance a sense of belonging and inclusion by allowing individuals who felt marginalized or unseen to reflect on their experiences and emotions and respond. This could then lead to the educator working with the students to reshape and reconstruct the classroom environment to create more inclusive spaces. In Anna's case, it helped her evaluate and reflect upon

the value of building relationships with her cohort when she may have done otherwise. For Anna, her educator might reflect on her lack of engagement and identify her work as both a barrier and an asset to her learning. While logistical barriers may continue to be a problem, an educator might consider the principles of Adult Learning Theory (Knowles 1978) to reconstruct an active learning experience that enhances Anna's engagement by harnessing her professional experience, thereby making the content applicable to her work while allowing her the opportunity to share those experiences for the benefit of the entire cohort.

Socio-material relations

A final area in the literature on relationship building in teaching and learning that we want to briefly consider are the relationships not just between people, but those between people and things within the processes and practices of learning. In this paper, we refer to these relationships as socio-material relations as a shorthand for the growing body of relational, new materialist, and post-humanist pedagogies. These highlight how teaching and learning are a process of constant becoming, always emerging through the multi-scalar nexus of relationships between people and things. Thinking about socio-material relations has influenced SoTL in a wide range of subjects, from music and literacy to geography (Semetsky and Masny 2013) and archaeology (Cobb and Croucher 2020), and in the online space from massive online open courses (MOOCs) (Cormier 2008, 2011), to the broader suite of digital learning methods (Gourlay and Olivier 2018).

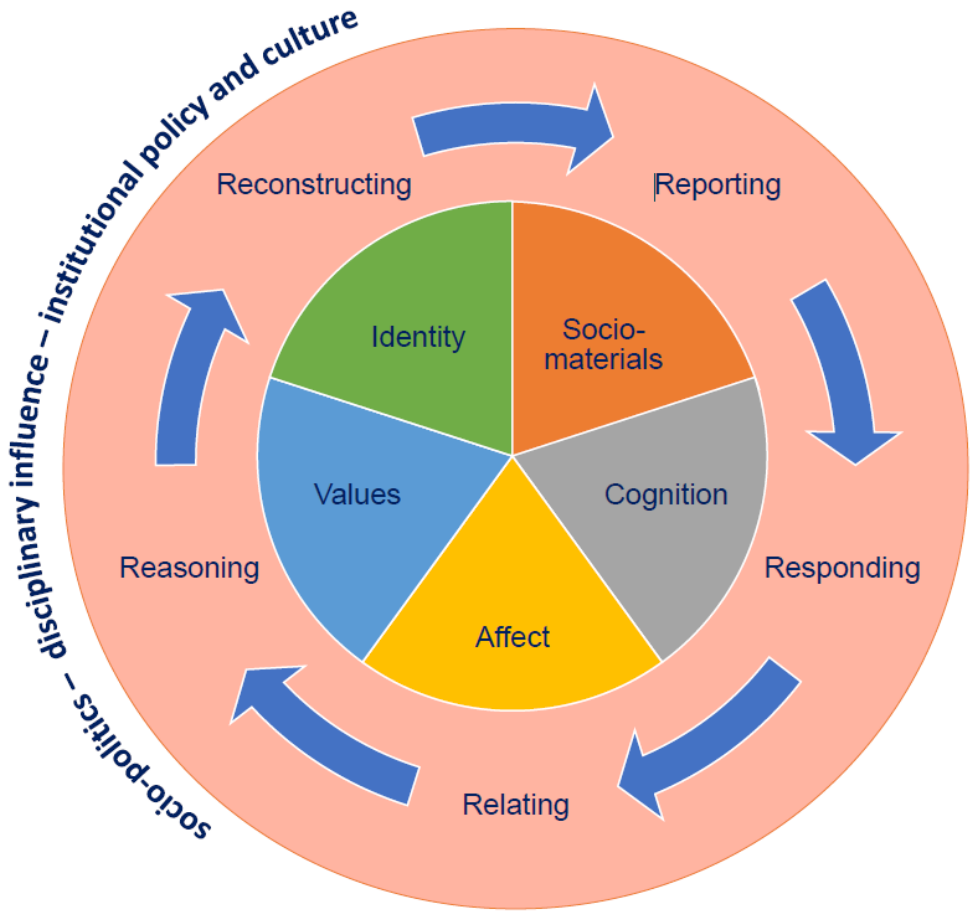
Beyond subject-specific approaches, Gravett, Taylor, and Fairchild (2021) discuss pedagogies of mattering and how important it is to consider not only human interactions, but how the socio-material context of teaching and learning can impact students. For example, physical learning environments can influence how and if relationships can flourish. The set-up of a classroom may facilitate power differentials through seating arrangements, placement of students with visible disabilities, or students with varying levels of technology. We see this in our cases; for example, Zarah's large lecture theater setup precludes relationship building, whilst spaces that are smaller and beyond formal classrooms are important for Kit to bond with their cohort—in this setting coffee and background music are as important as projectors and PowerPoints for enhancing their learning. For Maria, how online spaces are utilized impacts her level of comfort and belonging. The socio-materials of online learning can play an equally constitutive role in how students engage with the curriculum and others (Gourlay and Olivier 2018). Roddy, for example, is distracted by his roommate during online classes, while Anna's need to take classes during her lunch break creates the challenges of poor Wi-Fi and having her camera off; in both cases, relationships with and mediated through material things impact broader relationship building in their learning.

More recently, authors such as Bovill (2020) and Gravett (2023) have framed these approaches as relational pedagogies. Whatever we term them, they offer a valuable tool for reconsidering belonging and relationships in higher education, because they call into question not only the relationships between people but also the things and places that contribute to how students feel they belong. Although this paper has only hinted at their potential here, their value would benefit from a more in-depth review to inform future relationship-centered SoTL. Ultimately, as Dollinger et al. (2018) reiterate, considering the socio-materials of interpersonal relationships in conjunction with discussion of classroom practices and connecting them with the outcomes of students' academic experience can be one of those additional steps to improve the overall student experience. It is also important to consider how these relationships shift based on the modality of the instructional and learning interactions.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The aim of this paper has been to examine how the key factors of interpersonal relationship building between educators and students influence student learning and student experiences in diverse higher education settings. Drawing from previously published SoTL literature reviewed above, as well as experiential pedagogies engaged in by the authors and their colleagues, this section distills our findings and presents specific areas to consider and address for both SoTL scholars and current educators (and the many who occupy both groups simultaneously). Furthermore, we also present a model (Figure 3) that incorporates Felten, Forsyth, and Sutherland (2023) trust model and Bain et al.'s (2002) 5Rs of reflection, situating them in the context we have described within this paper. We hope this will serve as a starting point for discussion of an integrated and holistic model.

Figure 3. A conceptual model for interpersonal relationship-building



This paper makes the following suggestions to connect real-life teaching and learning situations to theoretical frameworks. These are deliberately contextual, adjustable, interchangeable, and adaptable—and presented as bullet points for clarity and to aid access to the resource for time-poor practitioners.

4.1 To foster interaction, communication, and belonging.

- Promote constructive interactions to contribute positively towards student learning, motivation, and overall well-being.
- Utilize and apply the lenses of positionality and intersectionality to develop and foster communication and collaboration with individuals from diverse backgrounds. This is key to developing mindsets that enable the creation of common ground between differing perceptions.
- Ensure active listening, engagement, and response to student's needs; it can be tempting to say "I know how you feel" in attempting to empathize, but this must be followed by appropriate action.
- Encourage a sense of belonging, connected to student agency and voice. Students need to feel that they are significant members of the learning community where they can grow as learners with respect and kindness.
- Consider classroom safety and student identities by considering what might work and why, if there may be different options, and if those changes would benefit the whole cohort.
- Facilitate more peer-to-peer connections in the classroom, to foster a greater sense of student belonging, safety, and engagement.

4.2 To foster interpersonal relationships at a disciplinary level.

- Contemplate ways to consider creating more inclusive environments and assessments, using universal design for learning principles.
- Consider how student voices can be reflected in the course/curriculum, how different perspectives are shared, and whose voices have been privileged historically.
- Reflect on how pedagogical values of the field are enacted in the classroom; and further, how they are communicated to students in relation to student-centered approaches.
- Encourage diverse perspectives and provide constructive feedback, necessary to create an inclusive and respectful classroom environment.
- Work in collaboration with the students and student feedback to reshape and reconstruct the classroom environment with the aim to create more inclusive spaces.
- Harness personalized interaction and inclusive teaching methods for enhancing student engagement and overall academic experience. Inclusive and student-centered pedagogical strategies ensure more engaged and meaningful learning.
- Demonstrate genuine interest in students' needs and expectations, so that educators are more approachable. Understanding unique learning needs and adapting teaching methods accordingly is crucial.

4.3 To foster Trust.

- Contemplate ways to become more approachable and a better listener.
- Build platforms to include students in conversations from classroom to institutional level. Student voices should be recognized and acknowledged.
- Incorporate more marginalized voices to bring unique perspectives into the process of providing "safe space" for students to strive and thrive.
- Create an environment where students feel that educators, support staff, and the institution are sincere and can be trusted to deliver effective education while also considering the students' success and wellbeing.

- Consider better responses to student stressors and how you can create a more supportive environment by listening and guiding students to resources.

4.4 To foster interpersonal relationships through reflection.

- As shown in Figure 2 in the previous section, use the 5Rs approach (Bain et al. 2002) to reflect and report interactions with students and what could be done differently to ensure connection and engagement.
- Reflect on the biases and assumptions that should be addressed in order to enhance connection and engagement.
- Recognize, acknowledge, and empathize with students' diverse life circumstances.
- Reflect and report on stress students are experiencing (when students are sharing their situations).
- Consider the factors within the situation and how they might have influenced what happened.

4.5 To foster good Socio-Material Relations.

- Recognize the way the material world can also impact and structure interpersonal relationships.
- Consider how to improve access to resources (on campus and online) and support for students.
- Consider how the materiality of spaces, on campus and online, can be enhanced to ensure student support.
- Identify the institutional and/or departmental gaps around building better student support and resources, then explore how those gaps can be addressed.

To better understand how this model works in practice, we conclude this section by considering one of our fictional students—"Roddy" through our conceptual framework in order to illustrate "visions of the possible and theory building" (Felten 2013, 122) (Table 1).

Table 1. Demonstrating the model in practice with "Roddy"

Roddy: *Male, second year of a four-year online undergraduate program, art major (textiles), native Spanish speaker, recently diagnosed with ADHD.*	
Interaction, communication, and belonging	Roddy feels valued because his instructor utilizes open and inclusive teaching practices such as working with the class to decode assessment rubrics and calling office hours "open hours" to encourage a more welcoming space. This makes him feel included as a valued part of the learning community. In turn, he feels less anxious in disclosing his ADHD.
Disciplinary influence	Roddy's textile lecturers have been inspired by Bell et al.'s (2023) use of quilting to develop pedagogies of care and hope, and to build communities–this enables his educators to take the time to get to know him, learning about his life in El Salvador, making that personal connection which allows them to see his potential and him to feel empowered in his studies, and a sense of belonging in his cohort.
Trust	Roddy's lecturers share their own vulnerabilities and authentic experiences with Roddy which builds trust in terms of his relationship with his educators. They offer personalized solutions to some of Roddy's challenges and convey that they genuinely enjoy learning about El Salvador

	through his stories, which makes him feel valued as a co-creator of the relationship.
Reflection	Roddy has the opportunity, through a more reflective approach, to identify his learning needs as it relates to his ADHD accommodation and shared living arrangement. He is encouraged through artist statement projects to reflect on his career goals and current learning achievements.
Socio-material relations	Roddy recognises the negative impact of his material surroundings on his learning and his relationship building with his lecturers and cohort, such as distractions from his roommate during online classes. To address this, he engages with other material dimensions of their shared space to improve the situation, buying noise cancelling headphones at the suggestion of one of his instructors.

CONCLUSION

This paper has laid out the approaches that hold the value in addressing gaps and fostering interpersonal relationship building, utilizing SoTL literature, including Felton et al.'s (2023) trust model and Bain et al.'s (2002) 5Rs of reflection. Crucially, this paper proposes that the broader literature addressing socio-political influence, disciplinary influence, and institutional influence should be combined into one holistic model, as demonstrated in Figure 3 above. This combination of approaches provides a powerful toolkit for educator and learner alike, allowing anyone in any learning context to reflect on and develop interpersonal relationships, whether between solely humans or between humans, things and places, while also examining the kind of trust moves that also need to be employed to build the interpersonal relationships that inform positive student experiences and student success. We hope that this discussion paper will be used as a reflective tool for educators to critically examine their own teaching practice and implement new interpersonal relationship building strategies most appropriate to their context, as well as to serve as a starting point to consider how the proposed holistic model can support relationship building in other unique contexts.

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