

## EDUCATIONAL INTERACTIONS AND THEIR DYNAMICS IN THE UNIVERSITY ENVIRONMENT

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**Abstract:** *The quality of educational interactions is essential to increase the academic motivation of university students, to achieve performance in learning and research, and to maintain an optimal level of professional satisfaction for students and teachers.*

*This article presents in a synthetic manner a series of studies and researches carried out lately both nationally and internationally, on the subject of the student-teacher relationship specific to the university education. We consider that for a constructive and effective relationship with the students, the following skills are necessary: assertive communication, an optimal emotions management and the willingness to learn at any age and from any interaction. From this enumeration, we cannot omit the specialized knowledge and psycho-pedagogical competences of the teaching staff.*

**Keywords:** *educational interactions; higher education; academic performance; teacher training;*

### 1. Introduction

The way we behave towards our students will put a strong mark on how they will relate, in turn, to those they will educate. In this way, teachers' actions influence long-term generations of students and pupils. Under these circumstances, it is important that the didactic relationship in the university and in particular, that of the psycho-pedagogical module meet certain requirements necessary for the quality training of the professionals in this field (Onu, 2017). The importance and impact of the educational relationship have been studied mainly in pre-university education, on the adult-child/adolescent axis and somewhat neglected the adult-adult education relationship specific to higher education.

According to Hagenau G. and Volet S.E. (2014) there is much less study on educational interactions in higher education than in the pre-university. In addition, the authors state that, limited studies of didactic relations in higher education often do not have a clear theoretical/ conceptual framework. Therefore, the above-mentioned authors have three reasons why research in this field should be expanded:

The first reason is that many universities around the world have relatively high levels of university abandonment, with high costs at the human and financial levels, giving as example the US (see Schneider & Yin, 2011). Thus, it is suggested that the investigation of educational interactions in the university environment and their optimization is relevant if it can contribute to the reduction of this negative trend.

The second reason concerns the need for developing a sense of belonging, that affects also the university professors. Thus, the authors assert, it is likely that a "positive relational environment in the classroom", including positive interactions and relationships, will have positive effects on their own teachers (for example, on the positive emotions of teachers, see Hagenauer & Volet, 2014) as suggested by the relational approaches of education (e.g., Graham, West, & Schaller, 1992; Wilson, 1992).

Thirdly, given the increasing importance of excellence in university education as part of the "teaching and learning scholarship" discourse (eg, Kreber & Cranton, 2000; Trigwell & Shale, 2004), the significance the teaching relationship requires detailed investigations.

## **2. Previous studies and research on the specificity of educational interactions in university education**

Studying the literature, we found out that, on the one hand most researches focus on the relation between the teachers and the pupils in the pre-university education, and on the other hand we came to the conclusion that the educational relation is a multi-dimensional construct which has been operationalized differently from one author to another. Another important observation is that for the teaching staff, teaching is one of the professional requirements, the other being the quality of research which is much appreciated and which is the premise of professional promotion in the academic environment.

We present a series of internationally researched researches, as well as local researches, which address the issue of teacher-student relationship.

For example, Hsieh (2012) shows that Chinese teachers have a different understanding of the teacher-student relationship than British teachers. Also, students studying outside their home country often have different expectations from the teacher-student relationship (Zhou, Jindal-Snape, Topping, & Todman, 2008). In addition, the studied discipline affects students' perceptions about the educational relationship of teachers and students, the conclusions of Sander, Stevenson, King and Coates (2000), in which psychology students have better evaluated the importance of personal relationships with teachers, than business students. The results of a team of Finnish and Australian researchers suggest that this is also true for teachers (for example, the didactic approach, including relational issues, of "soft sciences" teachers differs from that of teachers in "hard sciences," Lindblom-Ylänne, Trigwell, Nevgi, & Ashwin, 2006; Parpa, Lindblom-Ylänne, Komulainen, Litmanen, & Hirsto, 2010).

Educational teacher-student relationships vary not only between contexts, but also in the case of the same actor in different contexts. For example, Lindblom-Ylänne et al. (2006) found that the teaching practices of the same university professors differ, depending on the course format (seminars/lectures). The pedagogical context influences not only didactic approach but also affects the teacher-student relationship, since the opportunities for approaching students and building relationships with them in the formal teaching and learning activities are much higher in seminars than in courses. Thus, according to Hagenau G. and Volet S.E. (2014), this dependence context makes the formulation of a general definition of the teacher-student relationship difficult enough.

Regarding the impact of the teacher-student relationship on the continuation of students' academic studies and performance, a meta-analysis by Hagenau G. and Volet S.E. (2014) shows that the probability of staying at university is higher for students who developed a sense of belonging to the university because their study satisfaction increased with established connections (Palmer, O'Cane and Owens, 2009). Developing a sense of belonging is of particular importance in the first year of study, as most of the renunciation decisions are made later this year (Christie, Munro, & Fisher, 2004). Moreover, many 1-year students enter universities with unclear expectations and relatively high levels of uncertainty and anxiety, as the studies have shown, focusing on the experiences of first-year students (eg Gibney, Moore, Murphy, & O'Sullivan, 2011; Tett, Cree, Hounsell and McCu 2008). Brinkworth, McCann, Matthews and Nordström (2009) found that Australian students in the first year had unclear expectations not only in terms of their role as students, but also in terms of teacher-student relationship at university. Over 80% of the sample is expected to have "immediate access" to tutors and lecturers to facilitate the success of the study. Although they expressed the

awareness that university study is different from high school, they were expecting similar conditions in terms of teacher-student relationship. If students fail to connect to the university and their specialisation, for whatever reason (for example, unclear expectations, as Brinkworth et al., 2009), abandonment is often the result.

Although there is empirical support for the idea that peer-to-peer relationships are most important to students' feelings of belonging (Ramsay, Jones, & Barker, 2007; Strauss & Volkwein, 2004), relationships with teachers and tutors play an important role in the decision to complete their studies or to leave after the first year (Wilcox et al., 2005). Moreover, positive relationships with university professors not only contribute to the retention of students, but also facilitate other factors such as engagement (Strauss & Volkwein, 2004), effort (Lundberg & Schreiner, 2004), motivation (Rugutt & Leach, 2010), satisfaction (Calvo et al., 2010; Dobranska & Frymier 2004; Trigwell, 2005), involvement (Zepke & Leach, 2010); critical thinking and learning the basic principals (Halawah, 2006). Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) show empirically the independent influence of the teacher-student relationship on students' success in learning, controlling the different personal characteristics (eg gender, study area, orientation towards achievement).

According to Langevin and Bruneau (2000, pp. 49-52) the didactic relation in university education has eight characteristics: it is utilitarian (it aims to inform the students); is imposed (teachers and students do not choose, but they have to build their educational relationship for a determined period); it is accidental because a certain teacher teaches certain students; it is ambiguous, meaning it is less structured with fewer rules; is mediated because it takes place on a particular theme/content and a scientific structure; is located on a double plan, the cognitive and the affective one.

According to Ionescu (2000, pp. 65-69), students perceive as optimal a teacher-student relationship based on:

- the ability to communicate and collaborate with the students;
- mutual respect between teachers and students;
- spiraling congruence between teachers and students;
- a friendly relationship between teacher and students;
- good humor of the teacher;
- teacher's trust towards students;
- the teacher's sincerity;
- an atmosphere of partnership.

Another study by Englehart (2009, p. 714) highlights that teacher-student interactions, which are based on learner's needs and interests, "provide psychological comfort, strengthen motivation for study, and facilitate social development." Therefore, in the context of current academic education, the educational relationship should focus on collaboration and partnership, collaborative discovery of scientific truth, the formation of the student's abilities to achieve higher academic achievement, problem solving and the development of creativity and flexibility.

Ionescu (2000, pp. 65-69) argues in his study, that in order to perform quality didactic activities, it is necessary for the teachers to have the following qualities, presented by the author in order of importance:

- professional competency;
- psycho-pedagogical and methodical competence, pedagogical tact;
- empathy;
- ability to communicate with students;
- objectivity in scoring, examiner skills;
- imagination and pedagogical creativity;
- ability to capture students' imagination and to develop student's sensitivity;

- flexibility, ability to adapt quickly;
- ability to collaborate with students;
- calm and patient;
- interest in didactic and extradidactical activities of students;
- sense of humor;
- to provide students with a personality model;
- modesty;
- honesty;
- be a good manager;
- trust students;
- be sociable.

In the same vein, research by Parrot (1999, p. 39) on the expectations of first-year students from university activities indicates the following: to form good professionals; to prepare students for a possible teaching career; to develop skills for solving problems; to develop independent thinking skills; to teach students how to look for information and how to use it; mobilize the student for self-motivation and self-sufficiency; to develop their social skills; to develop their ability to critically evaluate information; to emphasize that theory is only an instrument for finding scientific truth and not to present theory as an absolute truth; to make the student take responsibility; to provide them with an environment conducive to research.

Inspired by the psychotherapeutic literature describing the therapeutic relationship as the main tool for achieving change, in educational terms, learning and development, we selected and adapted from Yalom (2013) a series of characteristics of the therapeutic relationship, that we consider appropriate for the educational interactions in the university environment. Therefore, they are formulated here as suggestions and proposals designed to help university teachers acquire new insights into the resource-rich ways of learning relationships:

- ✓ The professor and the students are for a period of time "road comrades";
- ✓ Involve students and be encouraging;
- ✓ Watch with empathy on the "window" of the students;
- ✓ Each student counts and has the power to influence interactions within a course;
- ✓ Recognize your mistakes, the difference between good teachers and others, do not consist in errors, but in what you do with them. More open admission of mistakes is a good model for students and an additional sign of their importance to you (Yalom, 2013).
- ✓ Create a new course/seminar for each year/group of students. The course/seminar does not only reduce to the information delivered to the students, but also involves examples, explanations and applications, dialogue with students, questions and answers, verbal, nonverbal and paraverbal communication, and therefore a certain affective charge, which has the role to influence in a positive or negative sense the interactions in the room and obviously the learning process.
- ✓ Technics are performing when emanating from the unique interaction between the teacher and the students;
- ✓ Provides a constructive, and specific feedback from which the student understands exactly what he/she has to do next, so that his/her attention, thinking and behavior is oriented towards objectives. This can often be a useful means of diminishing the defensive reaction, denial and resistance, and a kind and gentle and educational way of supporting students in the process of self-knowledge.
- ✓ Make your students take responsibility and make no decisions instead of them. "Once individuals recognize the role they play in creating the difficult sessions in their lives, they realize that they alone have the power to change the situation (Yalom, 2013).

Another aspect that defines educational relations in the university environment is constitutional rights of students (Matthews, 2009, pp. 656-658):

- freedom of expression: students have the right to express their political point of view and the ideology they adhere to, provided that this right does not interfere with university discipline;
- the right to public education in a mass education - any student who has the necessary skills has the right to enroll and become a student at any university and any faculty he wants, regardless of race, sex, religion or nationality.
- private rights - these refer to the confidentiality of student data, grades and their school situation;
- religious rights - the student has the freedom to practice any religion he wants, without the university participating in its propagation.

These rights are accompanied by obligations to observe the discipline and regulations imposed by the university, to accept that they are subject to drug controls and tests if they are suspected of being in the possession or under the influence of prohibited substances, otherwise they are sanctioned by expulsion.

### 3. Conclusions

Specialty literature addresses, so far, only certain facets of the multidimensional construct teacher-students relationship in the university environment. Studies conducted so far indicate that this relationship has a major impact on reducing university dropout, increasing motivation, engagement in student learning activities, optimizing student and teacher professional satisfaction, and increasing students' academic performance.

Thus, we believe that for a constructive and effective relationship with the students, the following skills of the teachers are very important: assertive communication, the optimal emotions management, the willingness to learn at any age and from any interaction. From this enumeration, we can not omit the specialized knowledge and psycho-pedagogical competences of the teaching staff.

So, the way in which the didactic relationship is built in the university environment is a powerful motivational factor for the students. Involvement of students in activity is possible through interactions based on mutual respect and safety, curiosity, understanding and support, cognitive and emotional validation, authenticity and passion for the content being approached.

A professor who loves what he does, his profession and is pleased with his financial status and social status, will convey that state to his students, helping them to realize their potential. In other words, through educational relationship, we can influence students to seek, to discover, to be curious and interested in the teaching contents presented, to trust that they can and will succeed if they make the effort. As A. Williams said, "I'm not telling you it will be easy. I tell you it will be worth it. "

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