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Interpersonal Relationship between Teachers and Students: An Intercultural Study on Chinese and Australian Universities

Suxian Zhan: Baoding Teachers College, China; Thao Le: University of Tasmania, Australia

Abstract

Ongoing large-scale Chinese education reform deserves educators’ attention on the interpersonal relationship between teachers and students. Similarly, recent Australian national education policy statements argue the importance of such a relationship. Long-established cultural discourses in China are deeply embedded in interpersonal relationship between teachers and students. It is strongly reflected in China’s educational discourse. This paper investigates the differences in interpersonal relationship between teachers and students at Chinese and Australian universities. Students and academic staff in Teachers College of Hebei University and University of Tasmania were invited to participate in this study. Narrative research was primarily used in this study. The results indicate that cultures, ideology and gender have a great influence on the perceptions of interpersonal relationship between teachers and students, particularly from the Chinese perspective; the significance of this relationship goes beyond the setting of current teaching and learning and strengthens further in a wider social context.

Introduction

The 21st century, as compared to the last century, is witnessing unprecedented changes which are characterized by pluralism, multiculturalism, explosion of knowledge and high technology. Different people with vastly different colours, races, educational and cultural backgrounds flock to different social sectors and form one community—a global village. These great changes have a strong impact on higher education. Within the framework of internationalisation and in the global context, stakeholders, policy makers, educators and teachers in Chinese higher education make a tremendous effort to combine various universities and invest much more money through different resources (Zhang, 2001 & Zhou, 2001). Similarly, in Australia, universities take great pains to seize the ‘golden age’ to increase student intake national as well as international students and open new courses to satisfy the needs of workplaces (Ramsden, 1992; Coffield, 1997; Biggs, 1999; Martin, 1999; ADEST, 2002).

Accompanying plenty of chances provided by the new century, great challenges arise as well. Both in Australia and in China policy-makers and educators in higher education have been aware of such a challenge: ‘nevertheless, there are challenges to be faced if Australian higher education institutions are to maintain the centrality of teaching and learning’ (ADEST, 2002). ‘However, grim challenges face education. There’s a great widened gap between the educational level and the construction of the rich society’ (MoE, 2004). University students who pay for their education are demanding value for money; society, who invested much more money into universities, has a high expectation for good educational outcomes; with the coming of increased numbers of university students, noticeable changes occur in an increased
size of classes, with students diverse in their experiences, ages, social-economical status and cultural background. In addition, with the coming of the information age ‘universities are no longer the main producers of knowledge in modern societies’ (Coffield, 1997). All these issues create a great challenge for teachers and educators in universities in both countries.

How to strive for ‘quality’ higher education, student-cantered education and outcomes-based education has become a common topic in educational and social discourses both in China and in Australia. The Australian Commonwealth Department of Education, Science and Training stated clearly that: ‘Teaching and learning will remain core purposes of all higher education institutions and a key reason for public investment in universities’ (ADEST, 2002, 1). Educational Initiative Agent Plan, 2003—2007 (MoE, 2004) was recently promulgated by the Ministry of Education, P.R. China to ‘focus on the construction of high-quality university and key subjects’ in order to enhance the quality of teaching in universities. Teachers as researchers in universities address these practical issues from different perspectives—either in terms of enhancing students’ learning or improving teachers’ teaching on a theoretical basis or in practical research.

This paper attempts to address such practical issues in terms of interpersonal relationship between teachers and students in universities and intercultural studies on Chinese and Australian universities. The discourse at the heart of this paper deals with the following two questions:

- How important is interpersonal relationship between teachers and students in tertiary level in teaching and learning in universities?
- What are the underlying different cultural norms that influence teacher-student relationship in different social and cultural settings? In order to address these two questions, narrative research was predominantly adopted to investigate interpersonal relationship between teachers and students in universities.

**Teaching and Learning**

At present, in the sphere of world-wide higher education, three main features surface:

- a shift from focus on effective teaching to concern for individual learner’s effective learning;
- a change from subject-focused curriculum to competency-focused one;
- a great change from stress on learning outcomes to studies of process-oriented learning and teaching (Prosser, 1999; Barry, 1999, ADEST, 2002). With educators’ attention drawn to the process of students’ learning, teachers, educators and scholars are attempting to carry on teaching and conduct research on students’ learning to foster students’ intellectual improvement, emotional well-being and social responsibility.

The West Review claimed that ‘providing high quality learning experiences should be at the heart of university endeavour’ (West Review, 1998: 16). In terms of the theoretical basis for students learning, there are two traditions—behaviourist theory and constructivist theory. The behaviourists focus their study on the individual child and his or her cognitive forms and direct their attention to create an environment to
help students progress and gain satisfaction (Joyce, 1996). Teaching knowledge is a matter of transmitting new knowledge. Similarly, learning knowledge is to receive and store and bring it forth appropriately (Bennett, 2000: 34). Giggs (1996) named this tradition as ‘objective tradition’. Piagetian constructivists on the other hand argue that individual child’s cognitive ability develops during his or her interaction with reality through own experiences. New knowledge is constructed when learners link their former knowledge and experiences. (Piaget, 1959; Richardson, 1997) It is further contended by Vygotsky and other sociocultural constructivists that each individual, as ‘the contextualized individual’, his/ her learning is facilitated by his /her social interactions with others and ‘what and how much students learn and remember is influenced by their beliefs, goals, expectations, affect and motivation’. (Paris, 1994) The theories of cognitive development provide teachers with substantial implications and richer insight into teaching: 1) learners do not passively receive knowledge, rather, learning is a process of learners’ active organizing, constructing and transforming (Joyce, 1996; Birenbaum, 1999; Biggs, 1999; Barry, 1999; Mash, 2000; Bolhuis, 2004); 2) Meaning is created by learners themselves not imposed by environment or transmitted by direct instruction (Bennett, 2000). Learning is ‘a social rather than individual phenomenon’(Bolhuis, 2004: 79); 3) Teachers’ perceptions of students and their learning and the teachers’ attitudes towards their own teaching are fairly important, because they deeply affect students’ interest in learning and the way learners approach learning tasks (Barry, 1999). As a teacher, he or she should facilitate each student’s way of perceiving, understanding and constructing new knowledge by means of providing ‘scaffolding’ to help them transform.

Empirically, researches on students’ learning were firstly conducted in Sweden in 1976, then in United Kingdom in 1983, then in Australia in 1979 (Biggs, 1999). Extensive research has been conducted on the different conceptions of learning held by students. Two approaches to learning are categorized: surface approach and a deep approach (Ramsden, 1992, 1993; Martin, 1999). According to Ramsden (1993: 40), a deep approach ‘means trying to make sense by relating parts of the material to the whole, using previous experience and knowledge to make sense of the new material, and taking a vigorous and active approach to learning the context’. According to Tang (1998), there are two basic conceptions of learning: qualitative and quantitative learning. Learners actively construct meaning of the content to be learned, which results in a change of their conceptions about the external world. Teaching from a qualitative perspective implies a constructivist model, which is concerned with facilitating students in actively developing and constructing meaning and their own personal understanding of what is being learnt’ (Tang, 1998: 102). Barley (1999) classifies learning into three categories: cognitive learning, psychomotor learning and affective learning. ‘Cognitive learning refers to learning that is primarily concerned with mental or intellectual processes. These processes might involve acquiring and recalling information, problem solving, and learning of rules, concept of learning, strategies for learning and how to learn and think. Affective learning refers to learning that is concerned with personal and social matters. This might involve the development of attitudes, beliefs, values and interests.’

Therefore, educators as researchers argued that high quality learning will be achieved by discovery learning, involving discovering answers to problems by learners themselves (Marsh, 2000), by ‘self-directed learning’(Bolhus, 2004; Miflin, 2004), by collaborative/cooperative learning (Dart, 1998) and by ‘contract learning’, a process
that is responsive to individual learners’ interests, needs and motivation (Milton, 1978). High quality learning is also characterized by long-term retention of knowledge, by being able to perceive relations to old knowledge, by being able to create new knowledge and by being able to solve problems. Dart (1998) developed the ‘presage-process-product’ model of student learning. High quality learning occurs when the learner is ready—cognitively, emotionally—to meet the demands of the learning tasks (Nightingale, 1994).

In accordance with the two theories on learning—behaviourist theory and constructive theory, two camps of teaching alignment theories emerge—traditional transmission theories underpinned by behaviourist learning theory and constructivist teaching underpinned by constructivist learning theory. University teaching transfers from ‘teacher-centred to student-centred; from knowledge transmission to learning facilitation’ (Dart, 1998: 226). Similarly, signs of changes move from research to teaching, from focus on students’ outcomes to focus on their learning process, from a great concern for students’ knowing to their doing and from enhancing their skills to valuing self. (Barnett, 1999) Teaching aim, teachers’ roles and adopted pedagogy in the higher institution context change over time with those theories. Conceptions of effective teaching and good teachers are also altered.

Influenced by constructivist learning theories, educators argue that student’s minds are not blank slates to be filled with information and that they are not passive receivers of knowledge imparted by the teacher (Barry, 1999). Instead, students construct their own knowledge in their respective ways, linking to their former knowledge and experiences. The implication of Piaget’s theory for teaching is that a teacher should enhance students’ discovery learning. Vygotsky’s implication for teaching is that teachers should provide an interactive student-teacher setting to increase students’ cognitive development. (Marsh, 2000: 28) Constructivist teaching practitioners contend that teaching is effective when it supports these activities. Teaching is effective by way of getting students’ engagement into learning-related activities that help and encourage students to ‘adopt a deep approach to learning’. (Biggs, 1999: 11) Teachers should provide students with a learning environment in which the learning context facilitates students’ understanding and construction of new knowledge (Prosser, 1999).

In line with these two teaching theories, teacher’s role changes from that of being a ‘sage’ to transmit knowledge to that of a facilitator to ‘guide on the side’ students’ learning behaviours. The constructivist teachers are guides, facilitators or meditators who provide opportunities for students to engage in exploration (Birgenbaum, 1999). Teachers are facilitators, negotiators and tutors in students’ ‘contact learning’ (Milton, 1998). Successful teachers teach students how to engage in robust cognitive and social tasks and teach students how to use these tasks productively (Joyce, 1996).

In summary, cognitively or intellectually, policy-makers, scholars and educators theoretically and empirically have debated with each other over two dramatically different theories of teaching and learning. However, they came to an agreement that it is the educator’s priority concern to attend to each individual’s needs, interests and learning motivation in university. Higher institutions should become a place to help enhance effective learning. Teachers’ work is to nurture each student and maximize not only his or her intellectual achievement but also social, emotional and spiritual
growth. (Barry, 1999) The vital role of university teaching is to ‘create powerful learners’. (Joyce, 1996: 7)

**Student-teacher relationships**

Beside the duty of educators and scholars to provide learning settings to enhance cognitive development and intellectual achievement, it became apparent that non-intellectual factors also deserve educators’ attention. Nightingale (1994) debates that in universities with increased class sizes with students from different backgrounds in many aspects, creating an emotional and caring climate is conducive to high quality learning and also very challenging for the teacher. Likewise, according to Biggs (1999), each individual teacher, like institutions as a whole, creates a learning climate either through formal or informal interactions with students. This climate is about how a teacher and students ‘feel about things and that naturally has positive and negative effects on students’ learning.’ He further stated that ‘the quality of the relationship set up between teachers and students, or within an institution, is referred to as its climate, the way the students feel about it.’

Teachers, either inside the classroom or outside the classroom, exert a great deal of influence on establishing a good quality of teacher-student relationship ((Barry, 1999). In such an emotional climate the ‘most important ingredients of effective teaching’ for teachers to build up, were to maintain and improve a positive relationship with students and provide respective materials to cater for students’ needs and interests (Jones, 2004). Students’ deeper understanding can be achieved through dialogue and collaboration with their peers and their teachers (Biggs, 1999).

It can be argued that student-teachers relationship is fairly important in teaching and learning. Theoretically they provide a rational for the importance of teacher-student relationship in teaching and learning. Empirically they form conceptions of good teaching and good teachers in terms of student-teacher relationship.

According to Barry (1999), students are humans first and learners second. The university is not only an educational institution for teachers to enhance student’s learning, but also an interactive community of human beings. German sociologist Ferdinand Tonnies distinguishes between the connotations of ‘Gemeinschaft (community) and ‘Gesellschaft’ (organization). According to him, Gemeinschaft (community) exists in three forms: kinship (‘we’ identity), place (sharing of common local) and mind (the bonding together of people resulting from mutual binding to a common goal, shared set of values and shared conception of being). A university is assumed to be such an ideal community or a tie that binds students and teachers together in special ways to something more significant than themselves through shared values and ideals. This ideal community of university helps teachers and students be transformed from a collection of ‘Is’ to a collective ‘we’ (Sergiovanni, 1994: Xiii). This view is illustrated as follows:

‘I am me—with thoughts and feelings of my own’. (Sergiovanni, 1994: Xiii)

Therefore, teachers need to attune to the feeling of any classroom as a social place where students are individuals and mix with teachers like their peers. They compete against each other, yet are longing to be appreciated and valued as human beings. Since human beings are social beings each student’s sense of well -being depends to a
greater extent on interpersonal relationships. ‘Establishing close relationship with others is essential for well-being and happiness. Through our interpersonal relationships, we establish our personal identity, express our thoughts and feelings, engage in collaborative activities with others and satisfy or needs for affiliation with others’. (Haslett, 1987: 196) ‘Teaching is fundamentally a person to person activity—a social happening during which the teacher and student are involved in teaching-learning process….only by interpersonal interactions and group interaction can a teacher fulfill the necessary job of teaching. … teaching involves a great deal of person to person contact, and this enables us to be human. (Barry, 1999)

Many students actively seek out support and attention from their teachers and from their peers. Support from teachers is clearly a major management strategy—it can be used to reinforce desired behaviour by the teachers as well as to build self-esteem and generally more positive relationships between teachers and students in a class. Self-esteem, which is an intrinsic motivation, is one of the most basic of human needs. It is a powerful factor in classroom behaviour. (Marsh, 2000; Marsh, 2000).

‘I am a student—with hopes and desires’ (Sergiovanni, 1994: Xiii). Learning is an individual matter, accompanied by the learner himself, at his own pace, and in accordance with his own interest, age, values, background (socioeconomic, class, ego stage development), learning objectives, and motivation for learning. (UTMU, 1976: 9; Milton, 1978: 212) To cater for each individual’s needs and interests, motivation and style in learning is fairly important in teaching and learning in universities. These are considered as the ‘hidden curriculum’, which exists implicitly in teachers’ ‘mannerism’. (Flinders, 1997) – teachers’ attitudes and treatment towards their students. According to (Barry, 1999), how good the teacher’s relationship with students is largely decided by the quantity and quality of contact made with each student as an individual. A good teacher treats students as individuals, has a loving heart and is warm to his/her students. He or she empathises with his/her students.

‘I am a friend—with love and warmth’ (Sergiovanni, 1994: Xiii). All students want friends and want to have a sense of worth, of belonging and of binding with students and teachers and are ready to make friends with both. That accounts for the importance of a friendly atmosphere inside or outside of the classroom.

‘I am a student with a teacher—with a will to learn’ (Sergiovanni, 1994: Xiii). It is agreed that students’ learning interest will be aroused and increased if teachers convey their interest into what they teach. Good teaching means that teachers show great concern and respect for students, according to Ramsden (1992), which is one of six key principles of effective teaching. Similarly, according to Nightingale (1994), principles for enhancing high quality learning are 1) engaging feelings and values as well as intellectual development; 2) establishing an environment (physical and social) to support the achievement of high quality student learning – minimize anxieties and maximize enjoyment. Effective teaching is characterized by ‘effective and enthusiastic communication of subject matter and taking personal interest in students, being willing to help and support them and enhancing their confidence in self-esteem.’ (Mortimore, 1999) As teachers, our effective teaching is largely determined by the extent of our relationship skills with students (Barry, 1999) Students believe
that their best learning behaviours occur when their teachers are ‘committed to helping them, take time to know them personally (Jones, 2004: 80)

According to Jones (2004), a significant body of research shows that academic achievement and students’ behaviours are greatly influenced by the quality of the teacher-student relationship. The research suggests that ‘the emotional aspect of the teacher-student relationship is much more important than the traditional advice on methods and techniques of lecturing would suggest’ (Ramsden, 1992). Bliss and Ogborn (1977) reported that students were likely to understand the content of lectures if lectures encourage involvement, commitment and interest in students. Ramsden’s (1992: 76) research in Australia showed that interest in undergraduate students’ individual needs, help with difficulties in understanding and learning and creating a climate of trust between teachers and students are fairly important in quality teaching and learning. The quality of the teacher (love, concern for students) is more important than other teaching aspects (Benenett, 2000). The relationship between supervisors and the supervised is fairly important in effective research and project supervision (Brown, 1987).

According to Gordon (1994: 24) good teacher-student relationship has

- openness or transparency, so each is able to risk directness and honesty with the other;
- caring, when each knows that he is valued by the other;
- interdependency (as opposed to dependency) of one on the other.
- separateness, to allow each to grow and to develop his uniqueness, creativity and individuality;
- mutual needs meeting, so that neither’s needs are met to the detriment of the other’s needs. According to Jones (2004), a teacher-student relationship is characterized by
  - almost complete openness, in which we share a wide range of personal concerns and values with students;
  - openness related to our reactions to and feelings about the school environment, with limited sharing of aspects reflecting our out of school life;
  - an almost exclusive focus on a role-bound relationship that is, we share no personal feelings or reaction, but merely perform our instructional duties. Teachers’ ‘caring is much more than simply the creation of warm interpersonal relationships. It also involves encouraging dialogue with students regarding curricular and instructional decisions, listening to students’ concerns, ensuring that all students have an opportunity to experience success, and ensuring that learning is fun and interesting’. (Jones, 2004: 80) Relations of cooperation are ‘central to the reciprocity of the student-teacher relationship. (Coady, 2000: 154). A good teacher’s personal qualities and characteristics should be ‘being natural, being warm, being pleasant, being approachable and being tolerant’. (Barry, 1999: 100) ‘Students prefer teachers who are warm and friendly’ (Jones, 2004: 78).

A Case Study

This study attempts to address this educational issue from intercultural point of view with an aim to dwell on similarities and differences in teacher-student relationship in universities in these two countries. Narrative research was primary method used in this study.
Participants
There were two categories of participants involved in this study—students and academic staff from the Teachers College of Hebei University and the University of Tasmania (UTAS).

The Australian samples were made up of twelve students and seven academic staff members, all from University of Tasmania. In the group of students, six male students and six female students were invited to this study. There were eight undergraduate students of diverse ages—five young learners in year one to year four and three mature adult learners, one master student and three PhD. students. Twelve students have different varieties of family, working, cultural and religious background. Eleven were Australian resident and one was a Chinese international student in UTAS. In the group of academic staff, four male academic lecturers and three female ones were participants of this study. There were five lecturers, among them three directors of year two and year four undergraduate students and of in-service learners, one tutor and one PhD supervisor. Their ages varied from around thirty to around sixty with vastly different educational qualifications and ethical backgrounds.

The Chinese samples were made up of twenty students and eleven academic staff members all from Teachers College of Hebei University. In the group of students, ten male students and ten female students were invited to this study. Eighteen were undergraduate students ranging from year one to year four. Two graduates studied in this university. They came from different geographical settings with different family backgrounds. In the group of academic staff, five male academic lecturers and five female ones were participating in this study. There were four novice teachers having one to three years of lecturing experience in the university; four lecturers having four to six years lecturing experience; three professors with over fifteen years lecturing experience. Their ages ranged from twenty five to fifty years old. Their professional experiences were vastly different from only involvement into lecturing in the universities to working as a peasant, a worker and as a teacher in the middle schools.

Data-collection
The researchers devised narrative-based questions to investigate the respondents’ views on interpersonal relationship between teachers and students and their experiences. They were asked to tell their stories by way of emails. Some data were collected in an unstructured interview way individually or in a small group discussion. Overall forms the basis of the data analysis.

The narrative texts were categorized into two larger groups—Chinese students and staff and those from Australian students and staff. From these data collected, researchers did an analysis and interpreted them from intercultural point of view to identify similarity and differences in their views on student-teacher relationship in the university context.

Data-analysis
The narrative texts were grouped into Chinese students and staffs’ views and experiences and Australian students and academic views’ on teacher-student relationship. The analysis of data yielded the following focus themes.

- their perceptions of the role of a lecturer in a university;
- their views on teacher-student relationship in learning and teaching;
their conception of a good teacher-student relationship. Each of these categories is explained below and illustrated with examples from narrative texts and transcripts of interviews. Names of individual students and staff, whose examples are used, have been changed to protect their anonymity.

Category 1:
Australian teachers and students’ views on teacher-student relationship

1. The roles of a lecturer in university teaching:
The data reveal the following attitudes and perceptions as follows:

- **As a lecturer, he or she has an equal status with students as a human being.**

  He or she should treat students as human beings.

  _I see it (teacher’s role) first as being a role to take care of the students as people before anything else._ (a staff member)

  The role of a lecturer is to care and nurture students’ welfare as a human being. In the dynamic process of teaching and learning, a lecturer should give a greater sense of equality and professional maturity to every student, value student’s self worth as a human being rather than only judge the quality of students by their academic achievement. Through interaction with students and a genuine concern for students and help with their personal troubles, each student’s own potential as a human being should be recognized and developed.

  _In the long run it is more important to me that they are happy, contented and socially well than it is they might get some arbitrary piece of paper from any institution. ... I see young life in particular as being very precious and we should nurture it._ (a staff member)

  We all need guidance and support no matter how old or intelligent we are. Life can throw many obstacles our way and unless you are willing to seek help and those you seek it from are willing to share, a relationship is hard to build. Once you have a good relationship between teachers and students that will last along time and you are assured that they will help you in no uncertain terms to get through your degree. (a student)

- **As a lecturer, his or her role is that of a students’ facilitator in their learning endeavour.** He or she should treat each student as an individual learner, catering for individual differences and needs and teach in appropriate ways. In the students’ learning process, a lecturer’s role is to enhance student’s self-directed and responsible learning and inspire students to strive for the highest possible learning outcomes.

  _I find that when I speak to John each time I am at UTAS he is able to make very pertinent comments on my work and steer me into the next phase of my project. He often takes time to discuss my personal and work circumstances and I feel that this helps him to understand the context in which I am working, living and studying. I meet with John only once or twice each time I am at UTAS but each meeting is effective in helping me to know where to go next._ (a student)
As part of this project, one of the groups decided to present the exhibition work of their school students in the XXX. I made sure that I went to see it and stayed for at least four hours, and they were so appreciative. I could tell that they really valued my support and encouragement and we had some lovely conversations whilst standing in the freezing wind. (a teacher)

- As a lecturer, he or she should create a friendly learning environment through a close rapport with students by way of interpersonal interaction and communication between teachers and students.

A lecturer should be easily approached, have patience, remember students’ names and give a constructive judgement to students’ assignment.

It is a good idea to get to know lecturers and once that rapport is built you will always be known by name and not as a "student" with an I.D number. (A student)

Otherwise it might be easy for students to get lost in their learning or on life’s crossroads.

In first year education, early in the year, students brainstorm what they valued about a favourite teacher. Students so often focus on the interpersonal aspects of the teaching and learning relationship. (a tutor)

In contrast, students don’t like those teachers who uphold a hierarchical structure

2. The role of teacher-student relationship in students’ learning and teachers’ teaching

- In terms of students’ learning, nearly all respondents stated that an interpersonal relationship between teachers and students is extremely important in students’ learning, both from a teacher’s point of view or from the student’s perspective.

I think interpersonal relationships are vital - it is essentially the reason we chose UTAS and that we continue to be so happy with our time there. Our interactions with our supervisors are effective, efficient and related to our personal circumstances. (a student)

It is possible for students to learn without having a relationship with their lecturer, I am not sure that they would learn as much, or be as interested as they would be if they have a positive relationship with their lecturer. (a lecturer and also a director)

Participants stated their views on how important such teacher-student relationship is in students’ learning in terms of students as human beings. They stated their views from this perspective as follows:

- The purpose of their entering into university is not to make money but to have encounters with new people, enlarge their circle of friends and enrich their life experiences.

At my stage of life the quality of the personal relationships is much more important than worrying about how to get ahead in my career, so I place a lot of value on the importance of mutual respect and friendship while I am learning at university. I am not learning so that I can make more money, I am at university because I want to enjoy the experience of learning new things and meeting new and interesting people. (a student)
A Trusting relationship between teacher and student minimizes antagonism and maximizes mutual understanding.

Also when there are trusting relationships, students are more likely to feel welcome to ask why they got the mark they did for their assignments. I think this is such an important aspect of ongoing learning. I find that it helps if I tell students “If you are uncertain about any aspect of your result for your assignment, please ask me for more clarification. No matter how challenging you think your questions may be, you are welcome to ask for more feedback.” I find that when I say this, students are less confrontational and less defensive if they do decide to seek more information about their result for an assignment. (a tutor)

Without a good interpersonal relationship we are closing our minds to knowledge and the ability to grow as a person. (a lecturer)

These respondents also stated their views on how important such a relationship is in students’ learning in terms of students as individual learners and self-directed learners in the university context. They put forward their views as follows:

- The establishment and maintenance of good interpersonal relationship between teachers and students is integral to learning opportunities for each student. Such a trusting interpersonal relationship enriches ‘scaffolding’ opportunities for each individual learner. It makes an easier way for students to seek guidance with their work. One of the respondents stated:

  This willingness to seek assistance is so important in Universities where there are many students from first generation university families – that is, for students who are the first in their families to be tertiary students. (A lecturer)

Positive interpersonal relationship is conducive to each student’s learning and caters for each student’s learning style. One of the students wrote that:

  Some students learn by pictures, some by talking, others by notes etc. and teachers need to use all so that it reaches their audience. (a student)

- Teachers’ respect and high expectation will affect learners’ attitude, stimulate students’ interest in content of learning and set up a friendly, harmonious and enjoyable environment. In other words, the more intimate the relationship between teachers and students is, the more intense the commitment of the participants to the project of learning. Conversely, the wider the gap between staff and students, the less chance there will be for the establishment of real commitment to the educational well-being of the other. In an enjoyable learning environment, students learn more because they enjoy what they are doing and this is influenced by the personality (perceived or otherwise) of the lecturer. (a student)

and
have found that a learning environment is better facilitated where there is an open and mutually accepting relationship between teachers and students. (a lecturer)

and

the stress of learning is greatly reduced when students feel comfortable and are happy with the lecturer and the teaching processes. (a lecturer)

- Good interpersonal relationship influences students’ learning outcomes and enhance the quality of learning. The expressed views were as follows:
  I believe that interpersonal relationships between teachers and students are crucial to the outcome of the learning enterprise. (a lecturer)

However, three respondents said teacher-student relationship isn’t as important as the relationship in the schools or isn’t important because of the following reasons:

- The role of lecturer is to research not to teach. They haven’t enough time to be involved too deeply in personal interaction with students.

  The primary duty of a lecturer is not to teach but research and the presentation of new research. (a student)

Or

- Students’ own responsibility for their own learning is much more important than student-teacher relationship in an electronic age. Otherwise, too much interpersonal relationship will have a negative affect on students’ learning.

  The use of electronic message board and the like have reduced the need for so much student-teacher relationships. (a student)

But I have also taught at a university where too much interpersonal contact has given students too much freedom and so they continually bend the rules (a lecturer)

- Power distribution between teacher and student and role expectation from each other control the establishment of a friendly relationship. The oldest respondent stated very clearly as follows:
  When I was an undergraduate (1962-1966 at the Australian National University in Canberra and 1968 in Sydney) I expected that the university lecturers would be the experts and have all of the necessary information in their field. I did not expect that there was any need for me to question them, or have any form of interpersonal relationship. (a matured PhD student)

  He continued to say that this attitude was still influencing as a Ph.D. student now. The reason for this was that he was brought up by his parents to respect his elders and to never contradict them. This was deeply imbedded in his mind and has a bearing on his learning behaviour towards teachers in the university today.

2) In terms of a lecturer’s teaching, participants responded that it is important to establish a link between the teachers and students because:

- With ever increasing numbers of students the space between students and staff grown wider
The large numbers of students and the way in which the transmittal of knowledge is conducted through the lecture forum, makes it difficult for the university lecturer to know all students and cater for every individual. (A lecturer)

- With distance lecturing via internet and video, interpersonal relationship between teachers and students is weak. ‘Face-to-face industries like education can’t suffice on distance learning models’.

   It is important therefore to establish a link between the students and yourself that transcends the impersonality or grand narrative situation of the lecture hall. (A lecturer)

3. Good teacher-student relationship

   **Characteristics of good teacher-student relationship**

   - Equality
     
     We do not want to put teachers up on a pedestal and feel that we cannot approach them. (A student)

   - Mutual trust

     Without a high degree of trust I don’t think we can work very well with a supervisor. (A student)

   - Comfortable and friendly working relationship

     My tutor was friendly and seemed to have respect for the fact that I already had my own career. In a sense, we were thinking of each other in more equal terms and I think that helped us to have a friendly relationship. (A student)

   - Mutual respect

     As an adult learner, I think it was more important for us to have mutual respect, which made it easier to have some form of friendship in that we were working together on a task. (A student)

   - Mutual concern

     It is too easy for students to become lost ‘in the system’ if they feel that nobody cares about them, or that nobody knows their name. (A student)

   - Partnership and mutual dialogue

     This time the lecturers and tutors would ask many questions about what we did in our own schools and then the students and lecturers would share their knowledge and opinions. The interpersonal relationships between the students and with the lecturers were much more important and seemed to happen very easily. (A student)

   **Ways to build up such good teacher-student relationship**

   Respondents said that such a good relationship is established and maintained on/through

   - Mutual personal respect
   - Mutual understanding
   - Co-operation
   - Altruism
   - The knowledge of each other
   - Strong bond of trust
   - Face-to-face interactive process
Category 2: Chinese teachers and students’ views on teacher-student relationship:

1. The roles of a lecturer in university teaching:
   Among their storytelling, Chinese academic staffs and students gave their views of a lecturer’s roles. These views are summarized as follows:

   **As a lecturer in the university, he/she is a learned person.**
   His/her role is to transmit knowledge to his/her students in an appropriate way. Therefore, the main responsibility is:
   To be knowledgeable in subject matter and proficient in teaching
   *Firstly, the responsibility of the teachers is to help the students get the knowledge (a lecturer)*

   *As a teacher, when he/she educates the students, there are two meanings here. First, the teacher brings knowledge to the students. The teaching ways are essential factors on which the successful relationship is depended. A successful teacher can choose an acceptable method which can reflect the teacher’s wisdom, teaching art and skills completely. As a result, the teacher can win the students respect much easier. (a student)*

   - To transmit knowledge in an appropriate way
   - To help the student respect the teacher in any situations. Especially in the lectures, the teachers must show their dignity, they must prepare for their lectures abundantly, they would better to make their students feel they are full of knowledge, the students must can learn a lot from their teachers. (a student)

   - To help students solve difficult academic problems
   - To stimulate students’ interest in learning
   - To carry on teaching effectively
   - To help students achieve their academic goals
   - To guide students in the classroom

   *A good relationship can help a teacher manage a well-ordered, supportive class, that is, students are willing to obey their teacher’s orders and respond to the teacher actively in class (a teacher)*

   **A teacher’s role is to give the students moral guidance in life.**

   *Second, the teacher moralizes them. He/she enlightens the students by illustrating trueness, goodness and beauty. Thus, the teacher shows his/her charming of personality totally to the students. During the process, both sides can know each other better and respect each other better. (a teacher)*

   **As a lecturer, he or she should regard students as friends or their children.**
   Teachers should create a friendly learning environment through a loving rapport with students by way of interpersonal interaction and communication between teachers and students. Therefore, lecturers should have patience and love for students.

   *You should love your students and they then will love you, you respect them and they respect you*
the teacher should regard them as one’s good friends, children, showing concern to the students, showing respects to them. Particularly when the students are ill the teacher should show his friendship to the student.

2. Participants’ views on teacher-student relationship in students’ learning and teachers’ teaching at universities.

In terms of students’ learning, thirty one Chinese participants in this study stated that interpersonal relationship between teachers and students are extremely important in students’ learning. They stated their views on how important it is in students’ learning as follows:

- Students are adult learners with their views and needs.
- Harmonious teacher-students relationship makes students feel at ease and secure in teacher’s classroom, thus encouraging student’s learning endeavour and facilitating their learning. The trust and cooperation between the teacher and the students makes the students feel comfortable and secure in the classroom. Only then can the students have the confidence to adventure in language learning. (a lecturer)

- A positive student-teacher relationship makes students feel happy, thus resulting in effective learning outcomes—to get their certificate successfully.

- Either in traditional ‘face-to-face’ classrooms or in on-line learning, it is of vital importance to cater for individual needs’ by ways of interpersonal interaction and build up a rapport with students.

- A good teacher-student relationship enhances students’ motivation and facilitates students’ self-directed learning in a humanistic learning environment.

- The skills and communication learned through a good teacher-student relationship enables students to build up a harmonious relationship in dealing with others in society.

- A good student-teacher relationship is the most important medium for students’ gaining knowledge and teachers’ transmitting knowledge.

- Good student-teacher relationship stimulates students’ interest in learning the subject and makes them attend the lectures regularly.

- A good student-teacher relationship minimises crime and suicidal incidents in the university and contributes to students’ emotional well-being.

- A good student-teacher relationship improves students’ self-esteem and firms their confidence.

On the other hand, if students lack interpersonal interactions with their teachers, they will feel a sense of loss or become frightened. This may have a negative affect in their learning behaviours and outcomes.

In terms of a lectures’ teaching, all of the participants responded that teacher-student relationship plays a role of vital importance in successful and effective teaching. They provided their views as follows:

- Once a teacher builds a friendly relationship with students, students will attend his lecture regularly and cooperate well with her/him in the classroom and an effective teaching outcome is achieved.
the students of the university are all grownups. They have their own thoughts, their views, etc. You must have friendly relationship with them, at least peaceful relationship. otherwise you may have some contradiction, have some trouble, how can you conduct your teaching (a lecturer)

- A friendly relationship will create a happy and harmonious classroom atmosphere to enhance effective teaching.

we students had a lot to say about the topic. The environment of our class was very active. Everyone want to speak out in her class. (a student)
- A good student-teacher relationship can help the teacher to manage a well-ordered and supportive class
- A good student-teacher relationship helps a teacher to get a genuine feedback from his/her students so as to improve his/her teaching

Conversely, a bad teacher-student relationship will cause failure in teaching.

3. Good teacher-student relationship

Characteristics of good teacher-student relationships
A good and positive teacher-student relationship is characterized by:
- Friendly relationships
- Mutual love and mutual respect
- Trust and cooperation
- Equality
- Mutual understanding

Ways to build up such good teacher-student relationships
The establishment of harmonious relationships is, to a larger degree, dependent on teachers. As to how to build up a good teacher-student relationship, participants stated their views as follows:
- Teachers’ rich knowledge and amiable personality is the basis of a harmonious relationship between teachers and students
- Teachers should treat students as friends, showing teachers’ love and concern, which will cause students’ to love them in return
- Teachers should treat students like their children when talking to them. Teachers shouldn’t criticize their students in front of their peers to let them lose ‘face’. If necessary they should sit down privately and have a talk with them.
- Teachers should have more personal interactions and communication with students, having an open ear to students’ personal troubles
- Teachers should show their positive attitude towards their students.

On the basis of teachers’ high expectation, respect, friendship and love, students will show their cooperative attitude, their respect, friendship and love to their teachers. Thus a harmonious relationship is built up on mutual love, understanding and respect.

In summary, good teacher-student relationship is built on teacher’s richer knowledge, appropriate teaching approach, respect and love, his or her personal interaction in or out of the class.
**An Intercultural Analysis**

In terms of the same educational issues, these respondents coming from different universities with dramatically different cultural and national backgrounds present similar and different views at the same time.

1. **The views are similar on the following items**

   **General perceptions of the importance of interpersonal relationship in students’ learning in university context**

   Almost all Australian and all Chinese participants in this study claimed that good interpersonal relationship between teachers and students is of great importance in students’ learning. Once a trusting and harmonious student–teacher relationship is established, an enjoyable learning environment is created. Students feel secure and safe in such a lively and entertaining environment. Their interest in learning content is aroused. Therefore, their learning outcomes are easier achieved.

   **General perceptions of the importance of interpersonal relationship in teachers’ teaching in university context**

   Almost all Australian and all Chinese participants responded that good interpersonal relationship between teachers and students is of great necessity to teachers’ successful and effective teaching. When a teacher is approachable by students and builds up a trusting and friendly link with students through interpersonal face-to-face communication, students can attend his or her lectures regularly and cooperate well with teachers in lectures. A lecturer gets fair feedback from students, improves his or her teaching and meets students’ needs.

   **General perceptions of good interpersonal relationships between teachers and students**

   The two groups generally agree that good interpersonal relationship between teachers and students is characterized by:
   - Closeness
   - Mutual trust
   - Harmonious relationship
   - Trust and cooperation
   - Equality
   - Mutual understanding

   Such a trusting student-relationship is built on the basis of friendliness to each other, interpersonal interaction with each other, mutual love, mutual respect and mutual understanding.

2. **Their Different views on the following items:**

   **Australian** participants stressed that a lecturer in university teaching is a person of the same social status as the students and also a teacher with richer knowledge. Firstly, Teachers should treat students as people with individual needs and interests to develop them to be true human beings. Teachers and students were borne with the same ancestors. They will die and become dust. They are equal. They encounter each other in the university to share their views and to grow together. Teachers may have a huge amount of knowledge, yet teachers and students are equal.
The role of a lecturer is to facilitate students’ individual learning ways and styles so as to meet their individual needs.

Harmonious interpersonal relationship between teachers and students is built on the basis of equality, mutual understanding, mutual trust and mutual love.

Males and mature adult respondents tend to regard interpersonal relationship as less important than female and younger respondents.

_Chinese_ respondents emphasized the role of a lecturer in university setting as that of a ‘sage’ to transmit knowledge and give moral guidance. Teachers and students have mutual expectations of each other where the transmitting of knowledge and information to achieve higher academic goal is concerned. Chinese teachers have the parent-like responsibility to guide students’ lives.

Teachers have the core role in establishing interpersonal relationships. The basis of a good interpersonal relationship is that teachers should come down from authoritative position to communicate with their students.

Females and elder students tended to regard teachers as authorities who embody knowledge. Out of respect and are nervousness they sometimes fear to establish a good relationship with teachers.

Results from the present study on the interpersonal relationship between teachers and students confirmed the impact of ‘cultural mindsets’ (Gannon, 1994) on social beings—teachers and students in a university context. The university is really a microsociety, with teacher-student and student-student social interactions. It reflects the values and attitudes of the larger macrosociety (Seaberge, 1974). ‘Classrooms reflect a culture’s general beliefs and values about education, such as how much education is valued, what is appropriate knowledge to transmit, how this knowledge is transmitted, and so forth.’ (Haslett, 1987)

Australians value individualism and equality. They stress an individual fulfilment, individual choice and ‘standing out’. (Trumbull, 2001) In terms of university teaching, teachers regard students as individual learners responsible for their own learning. Teachers, as individuals, share their views and beliefs with students. Guided by constructivist learning theory, teachers provide ‘scaffolding’ for each individual learner. They facilitate their self-directed learning to help students become emotional social beings and successful learners.

Chinese value collectivism, duty and responsibility. In long-established Chinese culture, Confucius is deeply embedded in every field in the society. Confucius believed that ‘the ideal individual has wedded his/her nature (‘jen’) to the rules of propriety (li)’ (Shapes, 2002). Chinese people emphasize authority, power distribution , rule-governed family and society and wellbeing of the group. Therefore it is seen as disrespectful for students to question the authoritative status of teachers. The teacher’s role is to convey knowledge to the students – the student’s responsibility is to gain knowledge from the teachers.
In summing up, the present study on this relationship goes beyond the setting of current teaching and learning and strengthens further in a wider social context.

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