

Co-creating Learning and Teaching

***Towards Relational
Pedagogy in Higher Education***

Catherine Bovill

Series Editors: Joy Jarvis and Karen Smith

**CRITICAL PRACTICE IN
HIGHER EDUCATION**

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Meet the author and series editors



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Book summary

Co-creating learning and teaching involves students and staff co-designing curricula or elements of curricula and has been described as one of six key pedagogical ideas in higher education (Ryan and Tilbury, 2013). In this book, I argue that meaningful student engagement through co-creating learning and teaching relies upon good relationships between the teacher and students and between students and their peers. Equally, co-creating learning and teaching contributes to building good relationships. Higher education classrooms (whether face-to-face or online) are a key site of collegial and inclusive possibility that are currently often an under-utilised opportunity to develop relational and co-created learning and teaching. Drawing on literature from school education and higher education, and using a range of examples of co-created learning and teaching from universities internationally, the book highlights the benefits of relational pedagogy and co-creation. Relational pedagogy and co-creation have the potential to lead to more human and engaged forms of learning and teaching in higher education. These are forms of learning and teaching that challenge accepted power relations between teacher and students, enhance inclusivity, increase the relevance of learning to learners and that enable students to practice and develop democratic skills and capabilities they need in their current and future lives.

Chapter 4 | Towards relational pedagogy in higher education

Good teaching is an act of hospitality.

(Palmer, 1998, p 50)

Introduction

We have seen in the previous chapters that there are many benefits from relational teaching and co-creating learning and teaching, but these concepts are often not brought together despite them being closely connected. Relational pedagogy and co-creating learning and teaching build meaningful relationships based on values of trust, shared respect and the importance of dialogue. In this chapter, I will argue that these approaches can be mutually reinforcing. Building good relationships creates a foundation for co-creating learning and teaching, but in turn co-creation of learning and teaching can strengthen positive relationships between teacher and students, and between students and students. I also explore the importance of teachers maximising the opportunities they have to develop deeper collegial relationships with students, and I offer some practical suggestions of how this might be done.

Relationships are a foundation for co-creation

All too often in HE, teaching takes place in ways in which staff and students remain anonymous to one another. In large classes, a teacher is unlikely to know all the students. Anonymous marking also often forms a barrier to relationship building between student and teacher focused on assessment (Pitt and Winstone, 2018). Students regularly experience inconsistencies of provision, where *'some teachers care deeply and some not at all'* (Baik et al, 2019, p 7). As Chris Manor, a student at Elon University, North Carolina states:

to this day Stephen... is the only teacher who has asked me what I wanted to get out of taking class. Ever. I had never even thought about it? What I want to get out of a class, how does class relate to me? I grew up thinking what I assumed every other student thought and the majority of students still think – what do I want to get out of class? An A. The thought of actively trying to learn something never crossed my mind.

(Manor et al, 2010, p 5)

This is a stark reminder that many students are drifting through university with little engagement (Arum and Roksa, 2011). So how do we establish environments conducive to relationship building? Several key ideas are explored in the next few sections.

The first five minutes and beyond

We set the tone in our first conversations with students. Plevin (2017, p 67) argues that *'outside your classroom before the lesson is a great opportunity to get talking to your students'*. Try to break the ice by asking something about their weekend or comment on something in the news or on social media. Try to learn students' names (Felten and Lambert, 2020; Thomas, 2012). This can help you to forge the first connections before you have entered the classroom with a new class. All too often expectations are influenced by the unwritten rules about how students and teachers should behave; as Shor (1992, p 2) describes, his students *'were waiting for the teacher to arrive and do education to them'*.

We have the power to transform classroom experiences, and *'early teacher-student and student-student encounters are crucial in relationship building'* (Bovill, 2019b, p 9). Gozemba (2002a, p 132) reports a student saying to her: *'When you come to class on the first day and the teacher says "We notice your attitude," they forget that we notice their attitude too. Students do the same thing'*. It may be a bit of a cliché that first impressions last, but for relationship building, teachers can consciously take steps to build better relationships right from the first encounter with a new group of students. The first five minutes is an amazing opportunity to set the tone for the kind of classroom you wish to build. Teachers need to demonstrate that they have a desire to get to know students, that they value contributions from students and that they are prepared to give something of themselves. How a teacher responds to a student's first contribution to class can signal very clearly to students whether their contributions are welcome or not. While time is needed to build trust and respect with any new group of people, the first five minutes, and the rest of the first class, can make it easier or harder for a teacher and students to build relationships over the coming weeks and months. Trust and respect are fundamental underpinnings for co-creation (as well as outcomes of co-creation), but they need to be established from the outset and given time to develop fully. Take time to explain why you plan to co-create, outlining how co-creation might take place and the variety of roles everyone might adopt – setting out clear intentions and different options can make it more inviting and easier for all students to engage. Provide plenty of opportunities for discussion and questions.

Example 4.1

Building hospitality for students online, MSc Clinical Education, University of Edinburgh, Scotland, UK – Gill Aitken, Tim Fawns, Derek Jones, Janette Jamieson and Debbie Spence

The online MSc in Clinical Education programme at the University of Edinburgh has witnessed strong growth in student numbers over recent years. In 2019–20, 207 students were enrolled across the three years of the programme. The whole team of academic and professional services staff work closely together to aspire to an ethic of hospitality throughout, but particularly in the first two to three weeks. They pay attention to the contexts in which students will be teaching and learning, remaining open to adapting course design in response as needed. Rather than asking students to give up their cultures and practices, the team instead makes space for students to shape the learning environment through their background, culture, perspective and experience. Although the team prioritises hospitality, they emphasise that they *don't own the house*; the online spaces are perceived as shared and co-constructed spaces. In practical terms they have found that the significant time invested in building positive relationships and emphasising hospitality in the early weeks of the programme pays off. For example, on the odd occasion there is a technical hitch, students have been more forgiving – perhaps offering more understanding because they have built a human relationship with the teachers facing the challenge.

We are aware of many cases in our programme... where face-to-face interactions are absent, yet there are still strong and trusting student-teacher relationships. We have developed practices over time that make use of our technologies and their accumulation of digital traces (email trails, online discussion postings, printed lists of student names, photos, occupations, locations, websites and search engines), to support social presence, communication and understanding of our students.

(Fawns et al, 2019, p 2)

However, it is also important to recognise that all of this takes time and this approach is not easily scalable, without investment of adequate resources.

Getting to know one another and enhancing the relevance of education

We need to be mindful of continuing the process of getting to know students throughout their time at university; indeed, Felten and Lambert (2020) talk about the importance of students experiencing *relentless welcome*. By making efforts to get to know the interests of students, we can also respond in ways to ensure that teaching becomes more relevant for students. Rogers and Freiberg (1994, p 35) claimed that:

nearly every student finds that large portions of the curriculum are meaningless. Thus education becomes the futile attempt to learn material that has no personal meaning. Such learning involves the mind only: it is learning that takes place 'from the neck up'. It does not involve feelings or personal meanings; it has no relevance for the whole person.

Shor (1992) describes teaching a class where he was just not connecting to the students and felt he wasn't getting anywhere. Instead of ploughing on and having a tough class for the semester, he paused and asked students what the problem was. Eventually, one student spoke up and explained how upset and annoyed he and some of the other students were with the class test they had completed prior to class, which they considered unfair. By taking time to ask questions and find out what was concerning students, Shor gradually found that the students opened up. Working together, the class devised a range of better approaches and solutions to the test, which they proposed to the College. This approach enabled respect and trust to grow between Shor and the students so they could progress towards more meaningful experiences over the rest of the semester. Shor moved from trying to implement a pre-determined plan for teaching towards shared decision-making with students about the direction of their learning.

Dialogue and active listening

One way of getting to know students better and building relationships is to ensure that there is regular dialogue between staff and students: '*relationships are built on dialogue and it's a lot easier to strike up a conversation with a student if you can talk about something which actually interests them*' (Plevin, 2017, p 81). This is not just idle conversation:

dialogue is open-ended; that is, in a genuine dialogue neither party knows at the outset what the outcome or decision will be... dialogue is a common search for understanding, empathy, or appreciation. It can be playful or serious, logical or imaginative, goal or process oriented, but it is always a genuine quest for something undetermined at the beginning.

(Noddings, 1992, p 23)

Noddings continues:

part of what is learned in dialogue is interpersonal reasoning – the capacity to communicate, share decision making, arrive at compromises and support each other in solving everyday problems.

(p 53)

A teacher can listen to what a student says and learn about them, but when a teacher actively listens, the student's ideas and emotions become something that influences the teacher in how they respond, and in how and what they teach. McDaniel (2010, p 100) argues that the process of dialogue helps us to gain '*a deeper sense of how the world seems to others*' and this enables us to realise that there is more of the world beyond ourselves.

Responsive teaching involves a teacher adapting what and how they are teaching in direct response to listening to students' ideas, interests and needs. In some classes, teachers also spend time teaching students to actively listen to one another. As Werder et al (2010, p 17) argue, '*while discussion has a primary goal of convergence (reaching the best solution or answer), dialogue has a primary goal of divergence – exchanging a broad range of perspectives to achieve a deeper understanding*'. Focusing on more responsive teaching and divergent assessments can be a powerful way of ensuring that the teacher is not seen as the conduit to all ideas. This also enables the class to build confidence in being able to work on tasks without the teacher. In a classroom involving genuine dialogue, the student is considered to be a knowledgeable and critical partner in learning (Aronowitz, 1981; Bovill, 2013; Darder et al, 2003; Freire, 2003; Shor, 1992).

Critical questions for practice

Reflecting on opportunities for dialogue within your teaching

- » How do you currently enable students to bring their knowledge and experiences into class?
- » What opportunities are there in your classes for dialogue?
- » What further steps could you take to make connections between what is taught and students' interests and perspectives?

Co-creating learning and teaching helps to build relationships

Co-creating learning and teaching, in drawing on students' knowledge, skills and experience to negotiate learning and teaching decisions, also contributes to developing relationships between teacher and students, and between students and students. When teachers and students set out to co-create learning and teaching, the initiative can come from either the teacher or students. However, where HE systems have established the teacher as the person typically responsible for learning and teaching, it is perhaps no surprise that much co-creation of learning and teaching is led, at least initially, by teachers (Bovill, 2014). Therefore, any teacher setting out to invite students to co-create learning and teaching in a class needs to demonstrate a genuine interest in the students, a friendliness and openness that is likely to help begin the process of building relationships and establishing trust. Teachers need to demonstrate a sincere respect for students' perspectives and capabilities, as well as a willingness to negotiate learning and teaching processes (Bovill, 2019b). For some teachers, this may feel like the natural way to teach, but for many teachers this can feel quite daunting, as it differs from how university teaching is typically conceptualised.

Mercer-Mapstone et al (2017), Deeley and Bovill (2014), Deeley (2014) and Bovill et al (2010) all specifically highlight the enhanced relationships, team-working and sense of community that result from co-creation and partnership work. Bron, Bovill, Van Vliet and Veugelers (2016) report that students involved in negotiation and shared decision-making learn to become skilled negotiators. Negotiation is difficult, and students will usually not learn how to become skilled negotiators by sitting in lectures. The processes of co-creating learning and teaching offer the opportunity to practise negotiation. Sometimes, staff and students get things wrong, or find negotiation difficult, but these lessons are formative in enabling both staff and students to enhance their ability to understand different perspectives, to listen, to compromise, and to make shared decisions. These experiences are important if students are to become future citizens and active agents for change (Bron, Bovill and Veugelers, 2016). These processes of negotiation and shared decision-making also enable staff and students to develop significant and meaningful relationships based on mutual respect and shared endeavour. Asplundh (2019, p 2) describes her experience of collaborating with faculty: *'it helped me see my professors as more human'*.

Example 4.2

Even bell hooks finds some classes challenging

The African American feminist writer and teacher bell hooks is widely considered an inspiring role model for those interested in critical pedagogy and relational teaching. Sometimes, I think it is helpful when our heroes and role models admit to struggling with some of the things we all struggle with. In the following excerpt, hooks (1994, pp 158–9) describes a class that wasn't going well.

I had this class that I just hated. I hated it so bad I didn't want to get up in the morning and go to it... One of the things that fascinated me about that experience is that we failed to create a learning community in the classroom. That did not mean that individual students didn't learn a great deal, but in terms of creating a communal context for learning, it was a failure. That failure was heartbreaking for me. It was hard to accept that I was not able to control the direction our classroom was moving in. I would think, "What can I do? And what could I have done?" And I kept reminding myself that I couldn't do it alone, that forty other people were also in there.

This example starkly illustrates the necessity of building relationships in order for teaching and learning to progress. It is also

a powerful reminder that a teacher is not in sole control of what happens in any class. We need to develop a wide range of strategies if we wish to communicate our intentions to share power with students.

(Bovill, 2019b, p 11)

Education as a shared endeavour

Strong positive relationships are often built during co-creation processes because learning and teaching becomes a shared endeavour where the teacher is learning and the students often contribute to teaching. As Freire (2003, p 63) argues:

Through dialogue, the teacher-of-the-students and the students-of-the-teacher cease to exist and a new term emerges: teacher-student with students-teachers. The teacher is no longer merely the one-who-teaches, but who is himself [sic] taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teach.

This overlapping and redefining of roles mean that teachers often learn as much from students as students learn from teachers (Boyd et al, 2006; De Los Reyes and Gozemba, 2002).

One common misunderstanding of co-creation is that students get everything they ask for. The term co-creation implies that this is not something that is student-led, but rather, teacher and students are colleagues in making decisions about learning and teaching together. It also does not mean that students' experience becomes more important than learning knowledge about the subject, but rather that knowledge is seen as something that can be co-constructed. The teacher and the students bring different knowledge and experiences to the classroom, and in this shared learning space, knowledge and skills are developed, but also relationships are built.

Sharing power

Co-creation requires that the power over decisions about learning and teaching is shared. This is not necessarily the case in relational pedagogy without an emphasis on co-creation. As Delpish et al (2010, p 111) observe:

students are accustomed to, and often comfortable with, assuming a relatively powerless role in the classroom, just as faculty are trained to believe that their disciplinary expertise gives them complete authority over the learning process. When faculty or students challenge these habits, students and faculty must confront fundamental questions about the nature of teaching and learning.

Co-creation changes the way we do learning and teaching in HE, and with this, the assumptions about where power in teaching and learning lies. Fielding (1999, p 21) argues for a *radical collegiality*, where *'students enter the collegium, not as objects of professional endeavour, but as partners in the learning process, and, on occasions, as teachers of teachers, not solely, or merely as perpetual learners'*.

Co-creation requires teachers to relinquish some of their power; as De Los Reyes (2002, pp 49–50) argues; *'the teacher needs to make it clear that he or she is interested in sharing power by giving students room to participate'*. This is harder than it sounds for many teachers who are used to controlling the focus and direction of classes. Breen and Littlejohn (2000, p 277) suggest *'teachers may need to come to see their own plans for classroom work as simply proposals... which learners have the right to reformulate, elaborate upon or even reject'*. New colleagues, and those on temporary or untenured contracts, may, rightly, be more nervous of changing the way they teach, due to concerns about how they will be evaluated and the impact this might have on their position. Yet, this is not about throwing out the idea of good preparation, but as Gozemba (2002b, p 72) argues, *'a teacher has to be willing to see himself or herself as a partner in education, not the master of the classroom'*.

There will always be some people who question whether power can really be shared between teacher and students due to the nature of the hierarchy in HE (Allin, 2014). MacFarlane (2004, p 124) suggests:

there is a danger here that it is only the students who are being encouraged to self-disclose details of their innermost thoughts and personal experiences. This is potentially an abuse of the unequal power relationship between the student and the lecturer.

However, this is not a description of shared responsibility and decision-making at the heart of co-creation. Certainly, we must be mindful of the traditionally unequal power relationship between students and teachers, but the examples of co-creation in this book help to illustrate that new forms of positive pedagogical relationships are possible. If you think back to the definitions in [Chapter 3](#), I acknowledged that some colleagues are nervous of using the term partnership due to its associations with equality, and some may be concerned about how to begin to create positive relationships with students. You may find it easier to start by enhancing active learning in your teaching, and working towards building relationships and co-creation in some specific elements of your teaching. If you are unsure where to start, there are some practical suggestions in [Chapter 5](#).

Critical questions for practice

Reflecting on sharing power in learning and teaching

- » What concerns you, if anything, about sharing power with students in your teaching?
- » What excites you about sharing power with students in your teaching?
- » I encourage you to discuss your answers with a colleague (staff or student).

The classroom as an under-utilised opportunity for relational pedagogy and co-creation of learning and teaching

Let us consider some of the key arguments I have made so far: positive relationships are at the heart of good teaching; positive relationships are the foundation for co-creating learning and teaching; co-creating learning and teaching helps build deeper relationships; most current co-creation and partnership activity is focused on projects involving only a few students; the first encounters we have with students are critical to communicating that we intend to take a relational approach, and that we care about students and their interests and experiences.

I would like to add that:

- » we are not paying enough attention to the power of whole-class co-creation in learning and teaching;
- » we are not paying enough attention to relational approaches to teaching in HE; and
- » each time a teacher meets a new class of students at university, whether face-to-face or online, there is an opportunity for something meaningful to happen. If you think of how many times, teachers meet new classes of students, the classroom is currently an under-utilised opportunity for relational pedagogy and co-creation of learning and teaching. Think about what might happen if even 20 per cent of these teachers were to take a relational approach to teaching.

I present here some examples of relational teaching and co-creation to help you to think about what might be possible in your practice.

Example 4.3

Initial teacher education course, Luleå University of Technology, Luleå, Sweden – Ulrika Bergmark and Susanne Westman

At Luleå University of Technology in Sweden, Associate Professor Bergmark taught two Initial Teacher Education classes with 35 students in each class. She spent time building good-quality relationships with her students to enable them to co-create the course with her. After the course, Bergmark invited her colleague Dr Westman, who did not participate in the course, to be a critical friend and co-author of a paper.

At our university, teachers are required to present a study guide (a detailed plan of course activities) two weeks before class begins. However, in order to promote student engagement, there was no completed study guide before the course started. Instead, the lead instructor posted a tentative study guide and information about the first session and invited the students to plan the course together with the teacher. Then, based on the learning goals of the course, they created assignments related to the content of the course, including the literature. The other part of creating space for student engagement was inviting the students



to be active participants in educational activities. This included working in study groups and using multimodality in the learning processes. For example, students were invited to illustrate learning theories through drawings. The students conducted role-plays based on student-formulated examples including their previous experiences of learning situations, in order to try out different learning theories in a fictitious situation.

(Bergmark and Westman, 2016, p 32)

Example 4.4

Relational pedagogy and co-creation at University College Northern Denmark – Louise Esko Refshøj and Steffen Holme Helledie

At University College Northern Denmark (UCN), Louise Esko Refshøj and Steffen Holme Helledie teach an 18-month 'Top Up' programme, which leads to a Bachelors in Innovation and Entrepreneurship, to 50 students each year. They emphasise building meaningful relationships with students and opportunities to co-create learning and teaching. One of the ways they emphasise peer relationships in class is to encourage each student to put a picture of themselves on the classroom wall with information about things that each student thinks they are good at and which other students should feel able to approach them about if they want help in that area. This celebrates the skills and attributes students have, as well as practically offering support to students who might need help in those areas during the course. Before the course begins, the teachers create a shared PowerPoint slides file and they ask the students to contribute some text or pictures illustrating what they think innovation is. Then as the course progresses, each time the class meets, some of the slides are shown and whoever is responsible for the slides needs to explain them. An unexpected result of this approach was that class attendance was fantastic, because they used different numbers of slides each week depending on how the class progressed, and so students did not know when their slides might appear and when they would need to be there.

Example 4.5

Co-navigation of a course at Edinburgh Napier University, Scotland, UK – Mark Huxham

Mark Huxham (along with Megan Hunter, Robyn Shilland and Angela McIntyre, three students in his class, and Jan McArthur, an expert advisor) describe teaching an ecology class of 35 fourth-year students. They refer to their work as *'a series of attempts to imagine the curriculum and our relationships in different ways'* (Huxham et al, 2015, p 531). In contrast to many courses that are pre-defined, Huxham and colleagues used mountaineering metaphors to describe the students as *'co-navigators'* of the course, *'moving forwards'* (p 531) as the course developed and progressed. They also experimented with teaching spaces, taking some classes outdoors and experiencing how this influenced the teaching and learning that resulted. They argue that *'the principles – of mutual respect, genuine sharing of control and rethinking the parameters of time and space to suit what is most appropriate for the type of knowledge students are engaging with – could apply in most disciplinary areas'* (p 540). Ultimately, this relational co-creational approach is about adapting and developing a new approach to teaching. One powerful element of this work was focused on the assessment for the course. Huxham was proud of the 'fake paper' he had developed over a number of years, containing a series of cunning deliberate mistakes, designed specifically for the students to critique. He even designed a journal cover page and logo (*Journal of Eclectic Research*). He was then understandably a little disgruntled when the students told him very clearly that they wanted to read and critique real papers not phoney ones. With the benefit of hindsight, he realised that his students had co-designed a more authentic and more challenging assessment.

Example 4.6

An efficacy-centred approach to online teaching – Manda Williamson, University of Nebraska, USA

Dr Williamson teaches an online 'Introduction to Psychology' course for 700 students in which she encourages students to build relationships with her and other students as well as providing opportunities to share decisions about the course. She makes it explicit that she uses efficacy interventions, which have



been well evidenced in psychological research. She sends the students a letter to introduce herself and share her expectations of them, and she states that she is confident that with hard work and persistence, they will succeed. She repeats versions of this message in all her correspondence with students, emphasising they belong and can succeed. She invites the students to decide what the class exam average grade should be. She then includes a discussion forum online for students to collaborate to reach the student-established class exam average. They co-create study guides, and post useful resources such as videos describing key concepts and they also encourage each other by sharing motivational memes. Students who successfully complete the course with a B+ or greater are invited to work in the Introduction to Psychology Tutoring Center. They assist current students with the course assignments, study skills, and they grade written assignments. These students volunteer and are offered independent study credit and a letter of recommendation by Dr Williamson. The course has twice the rate of student success of previous versions of the same course as well as other comparable face-to-face courses (Felten and Lambert, 2020; Williamson, 2020).

Summary

- There is a two-way, mutually reinforcing, connection between positive relationships and co-creating learning and teaching. First, positive relationships are foundational for co-creating learning and teaching. Second, co-creating learning and teaching builds positive teacher–student and student–student relationships.
- Relationships and whole-class co-created learning and teaching are inextricably linked but currently there is little research pulling these ideas together.
- Early encounters between teachers and students are key in establishing a learning environment that communicates the teacher’s intention to students, and opens the opportunity for building relationships and trust.
- Teachers meet new classes of students face to face and online regularly, but these opportunities are currently an under-utilised opportunity for relationship building in HE.

Useful texts

Bovill, C (2019b) Co-Creation in Learning and Teaching: The Case for a Whole-Class Approach in Higher Education. *Higher Education*. [online] Available at: <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10734-019-00453-w> (accessed 12 January 2020).

In this article, I provide an overview of how current co-creation and partnership work focuses predominantly on project-based partnerships involving a few selected students. I make the case for involving all students in whole-class co-creation in learning and teaching and for the key role of relationships in co-creation.

Lubicz-Nawrocka, T (2016) *Co-creation of the Curriculum and Social Justice: Changing the Nature of Student-Teacher Relationships in Higher Education*. Lancaster University. Paper presented at Higher Education Close Up (HECU) conference, 18–20 July. [online] Available at: www.lancaster.ac.uk/fass/events/hecu8/papers/Lubicz.pdf (accessed 12 January 2020).

This conference paper reports on research into examples of co-creation of the curriculum in Scotland, arguing for the benefits of co-creation in developing positive relationships and more socially just education and outcomes.