



Su, Feng ORCID logoORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0317-4033> and Wood, Margaret ORCID logoORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5067-1978> (2023) Relational pedagogy in higher education: what might it look like in practice and how do we develop it? *International Journal for Academic Development*, 28 (2). pp. 230-233.

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Relational pedagogy in higher education: what might it look like in practice and how do we develop it?

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Relational pedagogy in higher education: what might it look like in practice and how do we develop it?

This paper argues for recognition of the centrality of relational pedagogy for student learning and the important role played by academic developers in supporting this. In the paper, the authors situate relational pedagogy within the context of contemporary marketized higher education, explore the nature and importance of relational pedagogy, and they illustrate some of the ways in which it may be developed and enacted. Academic developers play a significant role in supporting academics' understanding and practice of relational pedagogy. The Covid-19 pandemic has highlighted the importance of a relational pedagogy at a time when care and relationships with others have mattered more than ever. Therefore, the authors suggest that relational pedagogy is an important area worthy of academic developers' attention and institutional backing.

Keywords: relational pedagogy; academic development; higher education; student learning; academic practice

Academic developers play a significant role in supporting academics' understanding of relational pedagogy, its importance and ways in which it can be developed and enacted in practice. This piece draws on the authors' reflections on their experiences of academic practice in higher education, including teaching, research, and responsibilities for the professional development of colleagues at UK universities. In recent times we have become more critical of measurability and performativity, suggested by some to promote teaching excellence. In our academic practice and writing, we have argued that more attention should be paid to relational pedagogy (Wood & Su, 2021).

Market logics, performativity, metrics and the commodification of higher education as a ‘product’ have become dominant rationalities in education policy reform (Su, 2022). As has been well-rehearsed in the literature, with the ascendancy of a competitive environment and economic purposes for higher education, students have been increasingly cast in the role of consumers who often incur a large burden of debt to pay the fees for their university education. In this reflection the argument is advanced that in viewing higher education through the lens of market, economic logic and consumerist framings, we may lose sight of the importance and centrality of pedagogic relationships for learning because ‘learning, at its heart, is a relational process’ (Felten & Lambert, 2020, p. 161). It is to the concept of relational pedagogy, its significance, and some of the ways in which it can be developed and enacted, that our critical gaze now turns.

Why relational pedagogy matters in higher education

Relational pedagogy can be thought of as the intentional practice whereby classroom learning builds connections and positive relationships for learning purposes. Having foundations in thinking that conceptualises teaching, learning and education as a relational process, in relational pedagogic practices the emphasis is on ‘personal encounters - interhuman relations - between educators and students’ (Chika-James, 2020, p. 271). Relational pedagogy develops connections between learners and this presupposes a learning environment planned with the intention of forging and nurturing learning relationships. Arguably the foundations for such a learning environment are grounded in trust, a sense of belonging, reciprocity and an openness to students and teachers learning from one another (Cook-Sather & Felten, 2018). This suggests a ‘flatter’ more democratic and less hierarchical power structure in the classroom, in contrast to a ‘traditional’ conception of teacher and student relationships, bounded by a view of the teacher as sole source of expertise and authority. To practise relational pedagogy requires not

only professional knowledge in one's chosen subject areas but also the willingness and pedagogic skills necessary to enact it. The development of these skills is an important part of the academic developer's role.

Research shows that relationships impact considerably upon students' experiences of higher education - meaningful connections with tutors are crucial (Felten & Lambert, 2020). With the commodification of higher education, students are situated as 'consumers' and according to the market logics at play, their choices as consumers drive improved quality. High ratings from satisfied customers have become an important metric for universities. Consumerism encourages a view of higher education in transactional rather than relational terms, as a transaction between 'customer' and 'provider'. Interestingly, a study by Bell (2021) which aimed to understand which teaching and learning practices increased undergraduate student satisfaction at a UK university, indicated 'the importance of developing positive relationships based on trust'. However, 'with more casualised work and increasing workloads in UK HE, stresses are increasing, possibly undermining the possibility for relational pedagogy' (p. 11), thus arguably having potential implications for student satisfaction.

Approaches to developing relational pedagogy

How can academic developers support academics and students to enact relational pedagogy in practice? Firstly, academic developers have an important role to play in establishing a community of practice for relational pedagogy in their institution. Communities of practice can enable a university-wide conversation about 'best practice' in learning and teaching. Creating such a community of practice requires an institutional commitment at a strategic level. Examples of the sorts of institutional commitments needed include allocating funding for communities of practice infrastructure; recognising participation in communities of practice by costing it into academics' workload allocations; providing professional development

opportunities for academics who would like to lead a community of practice; offering learning and teaching focused scholarship and research; and recognising the commitment and involvement of communities of practice in staff promotion exercises. Establishing a network of communities of practice could be challenging but feasible, as demonstrated by a university in England (Advance HE, 2018).

Secondly, academic developers play a key role in supporting academics to cultivate a 'relational pedagogy mindset'. By this term, we refer to an approach to academic practice which affords priority to the relational processes as well as to the outcomes of higher education. The academic developer role may be crucial in supporting staff to plan practical strategies to develop the learning environment where relationships between staff and students and students and peers are at the centre, whether in person or online. One way to cultivate such a mindset is to invite academics to reflect on their own learning journeys and explore how relational aspects may have shaped their own experiences.

In addition, there may be value in academic developers working with academic staff to plan practical strategies and approaches such as:

- prioritising time for conversations with students in one-to-one meetings. For example, an 'open door' policy could be established to encourage students to 'drop in' without an appointment, during advertised hours;
- organising subject relevant activities to allow students to develop relationships with peers and tutors, such as student conferences and field trips;
- encouraging learning partnerships and learning from each other as more democratic approaches to classroom learning;
- deepening relationships through tutor or peer mentoring.

Academic developers need to be mindful that to develop and enact relational pedagogy, conditions are required at institutional level. We need to recognise that building relationships with students and others takes time. It can be particularly hard for academics experiencing the stress and financial insecurity of a precarious job contract, exacerbated by factors such as lack of access to suitable places to meet with students to discuss their work, insufficient paid time for marking and feedback, and heavy teaching loads. Such circumstances can make it difficult for academics to connect meaningfully and build learning relationships with their students. Therefore, as discussed previously, it is important that institutions recognise the time and effort academics might require to foster such relational pedagogy in their practice and to resource this adequately if they are serious about the teaching quality and student learning experience as they have claimed.

Final thoughts

This paper has argued for recognition of the centrality of relational pedagogy for student learning and the important role played by academic developers in supporting this. The Covid-19 pandemic has highlighted the importance of a relational pedagogy at a time when care and relationships with others have mattered so much. Therefore, it is timely and appropriate to identify this as a topic worthy of academic developers' attention and institutional backing.

Acknowledgments

We would like to thank Professor Catherine Bovill for her valuable comments and suggestions on an earlier version of the paper. We would also like to thank the anonymous reviewers who commented on the original submission of the paper. Lastly, we would like to thank IJAD Associate Editors Anna Serbati and Henk Huijser for facilitating the peer review and publication processes of this paper.

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