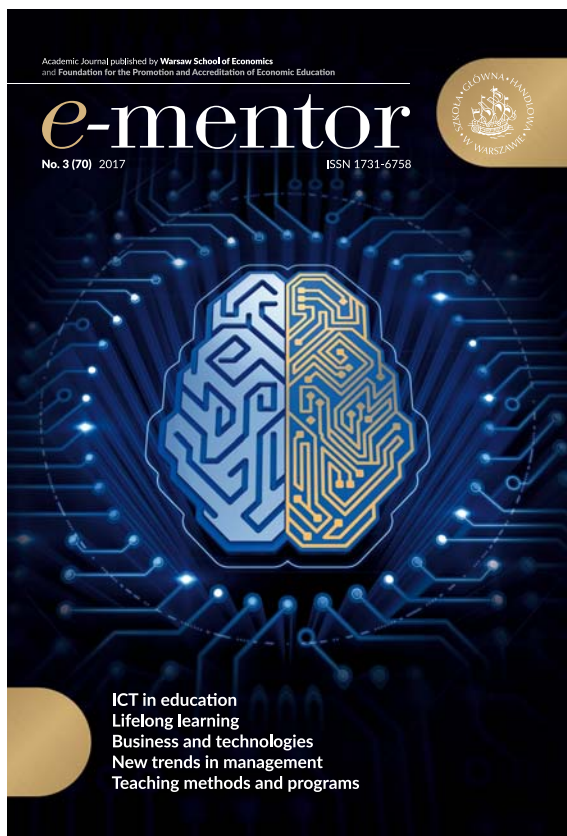


e-mentor

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Student Perception of Teacher Empathy, High Regard and Genuineness and the Impact on Student Engagement

Denise Bockmier-Sommers
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Martin Martsch

As the discussion of e-learning and its related research progresses, researchers continue to study the effectiveness of online higher education. Those who critique online teaching and learning indicate that there is a potential disconnect between the instructor and the students, as well as among the students (Reese, 2015, pp. 579–588), because of the limited amount or non-existence of face-to-face contact. As a result, both online students and teachers may be left feeling a lack of engagement and interaction at times. To mitigate this potentiality, online teachers must use a variety of teaching, assessment and design methods that facilitate engagement and learning.

When students do not feel connected to the teacher or with each other, their perceptions regarding the effectiveness of online learning are diminished (Aragon, 2003, pp. 57–68; Moore & Kearsley, 2004). If students feel little connection or relationship to each other, or to the teacher, their perceptions of the course’s effectiveness and vibrancy are lowered. If relationships among students and with the teacher are supported, students feel safe to interact, thereby leading to more vibrant discourse. In fact, Richardson et al. (2012) acknowledged fewer options for visual observations and verbal interactions are readily available in many online classes. Limited visual prompts have the potential to limit interaction among students and with the teacher. Additionally, students tend to feel more engaged and are less likely to drop online classes if they feel a connection to or are close with the teacher (Richardson, Arbaugh, Cleveland-Innes, Ice, Swan, & Garrison, 2012, pp. 97–125). As Motschnig-Pitrik (2005, pp. 503–530) explained, addressing the whole person within the learning environment, be that brick and mortar, blended or virtual, is widely documented in the literature.

Review of related literature

In an effort to bridge this gap, consideration of how interpersonal relationships develop might be helpful. Perhaps the most widely researched model describing the essential conditions for the formation of relationships is Roger’s Person-Centered Theory. The Person-Centered Model of relationship development was

developed, implemented and studied by Carl Rogers during the late 1960s. Roger’s theory was initially an explanation of how to build a relationship between a counselor and a client, and is not to be mistaken for the student-centered teaching model within the field of education. The student-centered teaching model sets forth the importance of using more personalized teaching strategies driven by student needs. Roger’s Person-Centered Model speaks to the building of the relationship between the client and the counselor. Today, Person-Centered Theory is widely taught within the field of counselor education. Rogers (1969) posited that in order for a safe relationship to develop between the counselor and client, certain conditions by the counselor must be established. These conditions are empathy, genuineness, and unconditional positive regard. Empathy is defined as “the emotional and cognitive ability to feel the problems or distress of another person combined with the desire to help or to relieve h/er distress” (Tausch & Hüls, 2014, p. 136). Genuineness comes from the counselor being authentic and transparent. Unconditional positive regard comes from accepting the client, regardless of his or her circumstances. Rogers conducted considerable research quantifying the effectiveness of his theory (Rogers, 1969).

Rogers later applied his theory to the field of education. At a core level, Rogers believed that all human beings deserved dignity and empowerment, offering each student empathy or understanding, congruence or genuineness, and valuing or prizing (Aspy & Roebuck, 1988, pp. 10–18). Further, Rogers (1969) and Rogers, Lyon, and Tausch (2014) maintained that learning is facilitated when the teacher uses empathy, genuineness and a high level of regard (i.e., the instructor’s efforts to help students feel valued) to help the student(s) feel safe, trusted, creative and knowledgeable. Treating students with understanding, genuineness and high regard requires teachers to approach their students as co-learners, and to step away from the idea of teachers serving as the experts.

Empathy or caring helps students feel understood and supported. Yet, in the Tausch and Hüls (2013) study, some 60% of university-level students indicated they felt no empathy from their professors. Similarly,

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Rogers, Lyon and Tausch (2014) found that students' feelings or emotions are rarely addressed in the classroom. They also found that students tended to be distrustful of the instructor when s/he was not aware of the students' internal feelings or reacted in a disingenuous manner toward them. If the teacher or facilitator was congruent or genuine when interacting with the students, they were prone to trust the facilitator. The third condition needed to positively affect the relationship between the facilitator and the student(s) is to maintain high regard for the student(s), so that the student(s) feel(s) valued and free to discuss the course content. When the Student-Centered approach is integrated into an online learning environment and is modeled for the students, they are likely to feel more comfortable utilizing similar strategies when they interact with the facilitator and with other students. In addition, as the facilitator models and uses empathy, genuineness and a high regard while interacting with the students, they feel emotional safety, freedom, engagement and curiosity, which become the pillars of support needed to move to a deeper level of learning (Rogers, Lyon, & Tausch, 2014).

According to Motschnig-Pitrik (2005, pp. 503–530), despite the fact that teaching approaches used in face-to-face classrooms cannot always be used in online classes, advances in technology make conveying empathy, genuineness and a high regard easier. For example, using Skype allows the facilitator and the student(s) to meet virtually, which in turn offers opportunities to convey a broader range of emotional and non-verbal behaviors, such as smiles and frowns. Such virtual "face-to-face" meetings also allow for more collaborative assignments, providing additional opportunities for the students to engage with each other and with the facilitator.

Using teaching strategies geared toward creating a collaborative and highly interactive environment can further increase student engagement and motivation. O'Sullivan, Hunt and Lippert (2004, pp. 464–490) argued that, when a facilitative exchange between the student and the facilitator or teacher was maintained, students were more motivated and engaged. Embedding Rogers' three conditions or values of empathy, genuineness and high regard, which facilitate emotionally safe learning, has the potential to increase the number and diversity of interactions and to allow students to demonstrate initiative, which in turn may result in deeper learning, problem solving, spontaneity and creativity (Motschnig-Pitrik, 2005, pp. 503–530).

Brooks and Young (2015, pp. 515–527) found that timely responses to student questions and overall teacher availability were critical to a more facilitative relationship between the student and teacher. Prompt responses to each student help the student feel important, highly regarded and understood. In other words, demonstrating empathy, genuineness and a high regard for the students in the course design and facilitation can be instrumental in developing student motivation and learning. It follows that when

motivation is increased, online students become more interactive with each other and with the facilitator, which may have a circular effect of further increasing motivation and engagement.

With these connections, the possibility of creating community in a virtual classroom may be increased. The creation of community and the ability of students to function within this community are essential to developing the skills and competencies needed to function in the 21st century. According to Reese (2015), these skills and competencies include "cultural and worldly awareness, self-direction, risk taking and creativity, communication, reflection" (pp. 579–588), as well as application of knowledge to their respective disciplines. When the online environment is emotionally safe, students have the potential to be more engaging and to feel more challenged and motivated to learn 21st century skills and competencies (Motschnig-Pitrik, 2005, pp. 503–530).

Although Fuller (2012, pp. 38–48), Handelsman, Briggs, Sullivan, and Towler (2005, pp. 184–192), Rogers, Lyons, and Tausch (2014) and Tausch and Hüls (2013) found that many studies discussed the needs and benefits for teachers to express empathy for their students and to foster the student-instructor relationship, limited research was conducted regarding students' perception of their teacher's empathy, genuineness and level of regard as it relates to engagement. The current literature of online learning has conceptualized some of the interpersonal factors described above. Dixon (2012, pp. 1–13) found that increased communication between the student and teacher is related to increased engagement. Motschnig-Pitrik (2005, pp. 503–530) discussed Roger's (1969) three core conditions in the context of motivation, but not specifically in the context of engagement. According to Mandernach (2015, pp. 1–14), researchers have difficulty measuring engagement. Moreover, the association between Rogers' (1969) main constructs/core conditions and online student engagement remains unknown in the existing literature. This study is an effort to understand the characteristics of the targeted populations and to fill the gaps in the literature by empirically assessing and exploring whether a relationship exists between engagement and the instructor's ability to communicate empathy, genuineness and high regard.

Methods

Data

All participants were undergraduate or graduate students from a Midwestern university in the United States. The subjects of the study were students who had taken at least one online course regardless of whether s/he is a 'pure' online student or an on-campus student. The subjects were recruited by posting a campus-wide online announcement and visiting a variety of classes. 185 students completed an online survey hosted by the University of Illinois Web Services.

Table 1. Brief Description/Explanation of Each Variable and Examples of Corresponding Survey Questions

Variables	Brief Description/Explanation	Sample Survey Questions	Instrument
Empathy	Helps students feel understood & supported	• Teachers see what students mean (or are trying to say) and how they are feeling as they say it	Barrett-Lennard Relationship Inventory (BLRI)
Genuineness	Prone to trust facilitator or teacher	• Students feel that teachers are genuine – talk to them straight	
Level of Regard	Helps students feel valued	• Teachers respect students Teachers are concerned and care about students	
Skill Engagement	“Student engagement through practicing skills”	• Taking good notes when studying class materials Staying up on the readings	Student Course Engagement Questionnaire (SCEQ)
Emotional Engagement	“Student engagement through emotional involvement with the class material”	• Really desiring to learn the material Applying course material to my life	
Interaction Engagement	“Student engagement through participation in class and interactions with instructors and other students”	• Interacting or helping fellow students Posting questions on course site	
Performance Engagement	“Student engagement through levels of performance in the class”	• Getting a good grade Doing well on tests or quizzes	

Source: BLRI: Barrett-Lennard (2015); SCEQ: Handelsman, Briggs, Sullivan, and Towler (2005).

Variables and Measurements

The researchers used two validated instruments from Barrett-Lennard Relationship Inventory (BLRI) and Student Course Engagement Questionnaire (SCEQ) to measure Carl Rogers’ core conditions and four factors of student engagement. Table 1 provides a brief description and explanation of each construct or element of the BLRI and SCEQ with corresponding examples/survey questions.

Barrett-Lennard Relationship Inventory (BLRI): The 40-item form was developed by Godfrey T. Barrett-Lennard to assess Roger’s core conditions, including empathy (10 items), genuineness (10 items), and level of regard (10 items). All items are measured on a six-point Likert scale, ranging from +3 (YES, I strongly feel that it is true) to -3 (NO, I strongly feel that it is not true). The higher the score, the stronger the perception is of a more positive experience in online courses or better relationship with instructors.

Student Course Engagement Questionnaire (SCEQ): The original student engagement questionnaire was developed by Mitchell M. Handelsman, and evolved into four factors of student engagement, including skill engagement (nine items), emotional engagement (five items), participant/interaction engagement (six items), and performance engagement (three items).

All items are measured on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 5 (very characteristic of me) to 1 (not at all characteristic of me). The researchers adapted some questions to fit online learning environments. The higher the score, the stronger the student engagement is. Table 2 contains the adapted survey questions.

Table 2. Adapted Student Course Engagement Questionnaire (SCEQ) for Online Environment

Factor	Survey Question
Skill Engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Doing all the homework problems • Visit online course site multiple times each week • Taking good notes when studying class materials (e.g., PowerPoint presentations, lecture videos) • Looking over class notes between accessing the course site to make sure I understand the material • Putting forth effort • Being organized • Staying up on the readings • Making sure to study on a regular basis • Studying course materials carefully
Emotional Engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Thinking about the course between course modules • Finding ways to make the course interesting to me • Really desiring to learn the material • Finding ways to make the course material relevant to my life • Applying course material to my life
Interaction Engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Posting questions on course site • Participating actively in online class activities (e.g., online discussion, collaborative activities) • Asking questions when I don’t understand the instructor • Emailing or calling or meeting the instructor remotely with questions about assignments or tests or course related questions. • Having fun in class • Interacting or helping fellow students
Performance Engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Being confident that I can learn and do well in the class • Getting a good grade • Doing well on tests or quizzes

Source: Chen (in press)

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In addition, demographic variables were developed by the researchers to examine the students' characteristics, to learn more about the population. Admission status was coded as online or on-campus. Sex was coded as men or women. The researchers also included four major categories: social science (e.g., psychology, education), natural science (e.g., biology, chemistry), humanities (e.g., English, history, communication), and business & technology (e.g., computer science). The number of online courses that participants had taken was categorized into six groups: 1, 2, 3, 4–5, 6–10, and more than 10.

Statistical Analysis

All data collected were analyzed using IBM SPSS version 24. Correlational analyses were conducted to examine the relationship between levels of empathy/genuineness/level of regard and the four factors of online student engagement.

Results

Of the 185 students who completed the online survey, 129 (70%) were female and 54 (29%) were male. The descriptive statistics results also show that 58% of students' majors were in the category of social sciences (e.g., psychology, education). In addition, approximately 80% of participants have taken at least two online courses. Table 3 provides more details regarding the demographic and other key variables.

The mean scores and standard deviations of survey items from the participants are tabulated in Table 4. The results reveal that all variables are positively and directly correlated, except genuineness and skill engagement. According to Davey, Sterling, and Field (2014), the Pearson correlation coefficient (r) may serve as a reliable effect size measure and has a convenience range between 0 (no effect) and 1 (a perfect effect). Cohen (1992, pp. 155–159) and Davis (1971) made widely used suggestions about what constitute a medium effect ($r = 0.3$ – 0.5) or a small effect

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics of Study Population ($n = 185$)

Variable	n (%)
Are you currently:	
an online student	62 (34%)
an on-campus student	123 (66%)
Sex:	
Female	129 (70%)
Male	54 (29%)
In what field are you pursuing your degree?	
Social Science (e.g., psychology, education, & etc.)	108 (58%)
Natural Science (e.g., biology, chemistry, & etc.)	18 (10%)
Humanities (e.g., English, history, communication, & etc.)	17 (9%)
Business & Technology (e.g., computer science, & etc.)	42 (23%)
How many online courses have you taken?	
1	39 (22%)
2	24 (13%)
3	21 (11%)
4–5	39 (21%)
6–10	29 (16%)
More than 10	33 (18%)

Source: Chen (in press)

($r = 0.1$ – 0.3). In other words, a higher correlation coefficient represents a higher effect or a stronger relationship.

The highest correlation was observed between the level of regard and interaction engagement ($r = .44$, $p < .001$), followed by empathy and interaction engagement ($r = .43$, $p < .001$). Emotional engagement

Table 4. Correlation Matrix – Barrett-Lennard Relationship Inventory & Class Engagement

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Empathy	–						
2. Genuineness	.69***	–					
3. Level of Regard	.88***	.68***	–				
4. Skill Engagement	.26***	.11	.18*	–			
5. Emotional Engagement	.31***	.20**	.31***	.61***	–		
6. Interaction Engagement	.43***	.22**	.44***	.59***	.60***	–	
7. Performance Engagement	.27***	.16*	.21**	.46***	.44***	.43***	–
Mean	42.86	38.25	44.43	4.13	4.05	3.77	4.40
Standard Deviation	9.88	8.08	10.22	6.07	3.76	4.34	1.82

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Source: Chen (in press)

was also associated with the level of regard ($r = .31, p < .001$) and empathy ($r = .31, p < .001$). Although significant, there were relatively weak associations between genuineness and the following three factors of student engagement: emotional engagement, interaction engagement, and performance engagement ($r = .20, p < .01$; $r = .22, p < .01$; $r = .16, p < .05$, respectively). Similarly, the association between the level of regard and skill engagement was weak ($r = .18, p < .05$) and the strength of the association between the level of regard and performance engagement was small ($r = .21, p < .01$). Empathy was significantly associated with skill engagement and performance engagement ($p < .001$), although the strength of correlations was weak ($r = .26$; $r = .27$, respectively). Finally, genuineness and skill engagement were not related ($r = .11, p > .05$).

Discussion

Due to these connections, the possibility of creating community in a virtual classroom may be increased. The creation of community and the ability of students to function within a community are essential to developing the skills and competencies needed to function in the 21st century. According to Reese (2015), these skills and competencies include “cultural and worldly awareness, self-direction, risk taking and creativity, communication, reflection” (p. 579) and application of knowledge to their respective disciplines. When an emotionally safe climate is established, students have the potential to be more engaged and feel more challenged and motivated to learn 21st century skills and competences (Motschnig-Pitrik, 2005, pp. 503–530).

The results of the study suggest that Rogers’ characteristics of empathy, genuineness, and high regard are related to the engagement variables. With the exception of genuineness and skill engagement, all of the bivariate correlations between Rogers’ characteristics and the engagement variables were statistically significant. That is, empathy and high regard were significantly related to all four of the engagement variables (i.e., skill, emotional, interaction, and performance), and genuineness was significantly related to emotional, interaction, and performance engagement.

Of the three Rogers’ characteristics, genuineness had the weakest relationship to the engagement variables. This finding makes sense because genuineness is a trait that seems to be more passive and less interactive than either empathy or high regard. In other words, students’ perceptions of an instructor’s genuineness may be more difficult to assess, in contrast to empathy and high regard. The latter two variables are more actively conveyed within the student-instructor relationship; hence, we find stronger engagement.

While skill engagement and performance engagement are important indicators of student involvement, emotional engagement and interaction engagement

are the most relevant variables in the context of Rogers’ characteristics. The data support this as well: empathy and high regard had the most robust relationships with emotional and interaction engagement. It appears that significant aspects of empathy and high regard are captured in the emotional and interaction engagement variables. While this relationship is important, it also suggests that empathy and high regard exist as independent constructs. The unique role of empathy and high regard in the student-instructor relationship requires further research.

This study helps connect the existing engagement research with Rogers’ characteristics of empathy, genuineness, and high regard. To date, online research has relied heavily on engagement variables to measure student-instructor relationships. Rogers’ characteristics provide a more focused perspective on this relationship, examining fundamental relationship-building variables in the context of an online class.

Based on the results of this study, online instructors might consider using teaching and design strategies to enhance the teacher’s level of empathy and regard for the students, which has the potential to result in a stronger relationship with each student. Rather than relying solely on a text-based presentation of the course content, instructors should consider using technology that allows for audio and video presentation. When dealing with complex suggestions or information, they could phone or Skype the student, so that their empathetic presence is more deeply felt. Another suggestion is to use audio recordings for student feedback, rather than solely relying on written text. If teachers do give written feedback, they should consider giving handwritten feedback using an iPad Pro or other tablet that allows writing directly on its screen. Teachers can also think about sending a brief welcoming email prior to the beginning of classes and responding to students who call within a reasonable time period, such as 24 to 48 hours. They should think in terms of what will help each student succeed. Teachers could embed a “tips for success” list into their class or syllabus, or create a blog or interactive chat room to discuss course content. They could use texting instead of email to communicate. These are only a few suggestions to help convey empathetic feedback and high regard toward each student. Remember that empathy and a high regard for students were shown to have a positive impact on engagement and student success.

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Student Perception of Teacher Empathy, High Regard and Genuineness and the Impact on Student Engagement

One of the main challenges for online instructors involves developing relationships with students. Current research in student engagement has conceptualized this process according to four areas: skill engagement, interaction engagement, emotional engagement, and performance engagement. In an effort to be more focused and to highlight the relationship-building aspect of engagement, the work of Carl Rogers can be applied in these settings by emphasizing empathy, genuineness, and high regard. This study sought to examine the relationship between student engagement and these Rogerian characteristics. Students (n=185) completed an online survey that included the Student Course Engagement Questionnaire and the Barrett-Leonard Relationship Inventory. The results demonstrated that empathy and high regard were significantly correlated with all four engagement areas, and genuineness was significantly correlated with three: interaction, emotional, and performance engagement. As hypothesized, empathy and high regard exhibited the strongest relationships with interaction engagement and emotional engagement. These findings suggest that student engagement (interaction and emotional) does capture aspects of these relationship-building variables. It also suggests that more can be done to measure and implement empathy, genuineness, and high regard skills in online teaching for more effective instruction.

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Martin Martsch has been an Associate Professor in the Department of Social Work at the University of Illinois, Springfield since 1998. He currently serves as the Department Chair, and teaches a variety of courses, including research methods, working with groups and families, and Introduction to Social Work. He received his Ph.D. in Social Welfare from the University of Wisconsin, Madison, his MSW from Florida State University, and his B.A. in Social Work from Boise State University. His research interests are in the areas of troubled youth, small group interventions, and program evaluation.

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WE RECOMMEND

10 Trends transforming Education as We Know It EPSC Report

The European Political Strategy Centre (EPSC) is the European Commission's in-house think tank, which mandate includes strategic analysis and policy advice. The report published by the Centre in November 2017 indicates the major trends transforming contemporary education from early childhood to the university level. In the document the already ongoing changes as well as the challenges implied mostly by the proliferation of new technologies are listed.

Full report can be downloaded from: https://ec.europa.eu/epscc/publications/other-publications/10-trends-transforming-education-we-know-it_en

3rd World Conference on Blended Learning (IABL2018), 18–21 April 2018, Warsaw, Poland

The 3rd World Conference on Blended Learning is organized by the International Association for Blended Learning (IABL) and Institute of Applied Linguistics University of Warsaw (ILS UW). The conference organizers cordially invite researchers, teachers, professors, administrators, trainers and technology experts to present the latest blended learning solutions as well as to discuss and exchange the latest findings and new ideas based on the ongoing research, practice, and experience. The organizers would like to invite contributions from across the globe, from all educational sectors and a broad variety of industries.

More information: <http://iabl2018.org/>