

January 2011

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Recommended Citation

Muller, Daniel (2011) "Building Relationships Outdoors," *TEACH Journal of Christian Education*: Vol. 5 : Iss. 1 , Article 12.
Available at: <https://research.avondale.edu.au/teach/vol5/iss1/12>

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Building relationships outdoors

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“Some students realise, for the first time, that their teachers are real people, that they enjoy many similar hobbies, and that they were also young once and have made mistakes in their past”

Relationship is a powerful concept when exploring human connectedness. The spouse, friend, mother and child are examples of relationships in which there is mutual care for the other and a desire for optimal outcomes for the other. This reciprocal relationship also applies to the classroom. Teachers care about and desire optimal outcomes for their students, however, without an established relationship, students may not reciprocate the same level of care and desire for positive outcomes.

The Learn4Life (L4L) program at Gilson College deliberately sets out to create a context that is conducive to relationship development. The program aims to develop self-confidence, independence, and responsibility by engaging students in real-life experiences of success, failure, challenge, and service. The program is implemented through three components: expedition learning, service learning, and urban learning. It has become evident to me that those students willing to form relationships with teachers and peers enjoy increased growth from the program. In my experience, the students who lack these relationships are less able to explore some of the learning intentions of the program.

L4L has provided me with an ideal environment in which to build relationships with my students and to facilitate relationship building between students. Taking students to wilderness settings and asking them to complete tasks that are outside their comfort zone, creates opportunities for bonding

that would not be possible in a classroom setting. Experiences such as watching a sunrise together, tending an injury, or collaboratively planning worship experiences allow students to view their teachers in a different light. Some students realise, for the first time, that their teachers are real people, that they enjoy many similar hobbies, and that they were also young once and have made mistakes in their past.

Most students want to get to know their teacher better but lack the opportunity to do so. For me, relationships have been established during the L4L program by listening to what students want to say, showing care and empathy for individuals, discussing a common interest, or simply asking, “How are you?” each morning.

Developing teacher–student relationships

Mutually respectful student–teacher relationships are central to improving educational experiences in the middle years. Much research continues to confirm, teachers relating well to their students remains one of the most significant factors in generating positive academic and social outcomes. (Pendergast & Bahr, 2006, p.211)

I have seen this dynamic at work in my Year 9 classroom.

I recall a student in my Mathematics class who resisted authority and did not like to be told what to do, especially by a young teacher for whom he had no respect. For the first few weeks of school, we regularly clashed on issues such as homework and punctuality. Then he found himself in my group for a six-day wilderness experience in Tasmania. As we trudged through the wilderness, with its hardship of rain, leeches and mud, the group of twelve city boys bonded with each other. I too, was able to use the setting to form relationships. I came to realise that simple tasks such as treating scratches and bites, having regular worship time, allowing the students to take leadership roles, completing challenges as a group, and debriefing after each day’s walk, all helped me to foster a relationship with the students. In turn, the students had an opportunity to experience a different side of me as their teacher. They began to realise that I genuinely wanted to help them and that I have feelings too.

At the first Math class after our return to school, the formerly belligerent student greeted me with a



[Cartoon: Michael Leunig]

handshake such as you might see rappers greet each other with in a gangster movie. As we moved into class, he told me he hadn't completed all the work set before the camp, but that he had tried. We weren't clashing any more. I attribute the change in that student to the time spent together in a different context, and to the care I showed in strapping his twisted ankle each night while away. This 'hard nut' is now in the school choir and visits me for regular chats. He has changed his whole attitude to life, which has in turn, changed his view about the genuineness of teachers; he now understands that we care.

The concept of relationship is important if teachers want to reach their students, but the L4L program also aims to influence the attitudes and relationships between students and their peers.

Developing student–student relationships

One year later, I was back in Tasmania; this time leading a group of girls from a range of social and cultural backgrounds on a six-day expedition. The first day required a long 9-hour walk, in rain and then darkness. Along the way, I observed the emergence of a group hierarchy and formation of sub-groups. Following a severely cold and frosty night, the first challenge of day two was to work together to cross a stream. In the two hours it took to cross the stream, I saw outstanding examples of teamwork; however, the segregation remained.

As the morning progressed, I was at the back of the line with two girls, each from very different social groups but both were struggling to keep up. I started a conversation in an attempt to lift the mood. When we caught up with the group for lunch, the two girls chose to sit together. I quietly observed the development of this unlikely relationship; they were sitting by themselves, talking and laughing as if they had been friends forever. This new environment, together with the joys and challenges it provided, had given these two young people an experience neither they, nor I, will ever forget. The new openness shown by these two girls spread to the rest of the group. They each came to realise that they were all going through the same trials and tribulations.

Relationship as the foundation for instruction

I have come to see that forming real relationships with my students is a key to not only prepare them for life now, but also for life eternal. Jesus made time for building relationships and often used relationships as a basis from which to give instruction. He humbly washed the feet of His disciples and ate with them before revealing more

of himself and of God's mission (John 13–16). He took the time to break down cultural and spiritual barriers between himself and the Samaritan woman at the well before teaching her about God's kingdom (John 4). In order to have the most positive impact on students, teachers need to work on relationship building. Using Jesus as their example, teachers are called to walk with them, talk with them and tend to their cares. This places teachers in the best position from which to give instruction.

Jesus used the outdoors extensively. As he walked, he was able to develop a relationship with his disciples and they grew to know him. Teachers need to get to know who their students really are, and use this information to initiate meaningful interaction. A foundation for trust and respect can be built in this way.

The outdoors provides opportunities for students to share their life story, see their first sun set, eat burnt food, or sleep in a tent. These joys and trials open a window through which teachers can gain a better understanding of their students. Students also have an opportunity to see how teachers and peers deal with adventure and adversity. Although relationships with students can be formed in a four-walled room, the largely untapped setting of the great outdoors offers rich and rewarding relationship building opportunities. **TEACH**

References

- Leunig, M. Cartoon retrieved 4 April 2011 from <http://poltoons.blogspot.com/2007/09/references-and-inspiration-2.html>
- Pendergast, D., & Bahr, N. (Eds.). (2006). *Teaching middle years: Rethinking curriculum, pedagogy and assessment*. Allen & Unwin, Crows Nest, NSW.

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[Photography:
Peter Beamish]