

Trust Building: The Case of Community College Students and Their Teachers

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Abstract

While fear and trust have an inextricable relationship and subtly affect human communications, the communication between student and teacher could determine whether student learning is successful. Eighteen recent graduates of different associate degree programmes were interviewed and the data collected were transcribed and thematically analysed. The results indicate that some students show strong fear of their lecturers and would avoid unnecessary contacts with them. However, these students do not necessarily fear their teachers as 'persons', given that they possess just the same status of being an adult. The students' fear derives more directly from the worries that they may be forced to switched to a "child/student" role while interacting with their teachers. Interestingly, male students tend to consider themselves more as someone having equal status (i.e. friends) as their teachers. In this regard, they would consider asking someone of equal status for help as a gesture of weakness. They would also averse to losing 'faces', taking the risk of being rejected or judged by their lecturers for asking questions that are 'too simple'. Hence, the fear involved for these students should be more collocated with the perceived humiliation when interacting with the lecturers. Lastly, for students who show desire to play the role of adults, their reaction to such denial of adulthood can be fierce, provoking open confrontations and other destructive behavior in classrooms. This study reveals that teachers having good human skills can effectively create a better student-teacher relationship. The essence of such good human skills lies in catering to student self-esteem and fostering trust in the relationship.

Keywords: Teacher-student relationship, teacher-student communication, learning experience, trust building, student's voice, student satisfaction

Introduction

Communication between teachers and students is both content and relational driven (Frymier & Houser, 2000). While communication in terms of methods of teaching is noticeably essential, the nature of communication as such is equally important (Frymier & Houser, 2000). Extant research has looked extensively into the relational factors based upon teacher-student communication and their effects on student learning and performance, examples include: immediacy (Andersen, 1979); caring (Teven and

McCroskey, 1997); explicit and engaging instruction (Paolini, 2015); self-disclosure (Sorensen, 1989); and compliance-gaining (Plax and Kearney, 1992). Furthermore, teachers engaging in positive interpersonal behaviours such as providing encouragement and offering individual feedback are perceived more favorably pertinent to student learning and satisfaction (Heckman & Walker, 1990).

While there are relational factors which could impact student learning positively, there are also scenarios of the reversal. Students' fear in the classroom, for example, has been discussed by scholars like Bledsoe and Baskin, (2014); Cox, (2009) and Moltz, (2009). Cox's (2009) study, for instance, describes that students would often admit that they were intimidated by their professors. Looking at the situation in Hong Kong, it is not uncommon to see that students avoid communication with their teachers; some behaviors include: students not seek help from the teachers despite facing difficulties; students not visit teachers alone even if they have problems with their studies; when communicating with the lecturers (telephone or email), students deliberately hide their identities (not revealing their names); they are not comfortable to have their names called in the classroom by their teacher. These phenomena suggest that students may actually find teachers to be intimidating, thus fear generated towards them. In this light, the current study probes on whether fear and trust in teacher-student communication could determine students' success in learning.

Transactional analysis has served as a popular language in describing teacher-student relationship (Mei, 2016; Rajan and Chacko, 2012; Stuart and Algar, 2011). Educational transactional analysis, in particular, has assumed a stronger presence in schools with substantial support provided to educational practitioners (Barrow, 2015). In connection to the phenomena described above, Berne's (1961, 1964) theory in transactional analysis sheds light on the nature of fear and trust. According to Berne (1961, 1964), the Child is one's internal domain which forms reaction and feelings to external events. The Child is the seeing, hearing, feeling, and emotional body of data within each of us which sustains the life position of Not OK. Negative feelings are perpetually recorded in the Child upon its reaction to the early situation of the childhood (Harris, 1995). Fear, for example, is a negative feeling which could condition and dominate the life of an individual and would require the person to substantially deal with in order to attain the position of I am OK (Harris, 1995). In contrast, the Not OK position can be seen as not feeling good about oneself and a lack of trust in others. The negative life position further hurdles the individual in forming trusting and lasting relationships with others (Solomon, 2003).

Berne's (1964) classic definition of games states that "A game is an ongoing series of complementary ulterior transactions progressing to a well-defined, predictable outcome" (p.48). Games are the most common way for people to deal with the predominant Not OK position (Harris, 1995). While human communication is part of the complex transactions from which games could occur, the Not OK feelings including fear could affect communication in at least two forms: First, the ulterior motive in the

communication is to ease the burden of the Not OK or overcome such estrangement generated by the position (Harris, 1995). Second, the individual will continually be more caught up in an anxious "scorekeeping of good and bad works" (Harris, 1995, p.221). The nature of Not OK transaction or communication is what Berne (1964) refers to as the "tragic script" which leads to despair. On the other hand, the "practical and constructive script" (Berne, 1964) results in happiness providing that other cast in the transaction are well chosen and play their parts satisfactorily.

In the realm of education, the pivotal question then lies in what kind of communication is narrated by students as "practical and constructive"? How are we going to ensure satisfactory transaction between teacher and student? Poon and Lau's (2014) study on community students' perception on effective part-time lecturers (PTLs) provide a succinct summary of such satisfactory, unthreatening transaction:

"Showing friendliness by using humour and smiling; helping students in their career or personal problems are all the gestures that can improve relationship. Sharing one's own personal experience with students, and paying attention to students' needs, and communicating with students in and out of the class can be signs of being psychologically open to students. They can be considered as indications the teacher is not looking down upon the students - students are 'at par' with the teacher and they are not being ignored." (p. 66)

Poon and Lau's (2014) study points out that students genuinely prefer PTLs who demonstrate high Relationship Oriented Behaviour. In this connection, it would be interesting to further investigate how teachers who assume a different status quo with students in terms of relationship and communication will be perceived through the eyes of their students.

Methodology

Data collection

Students' perception for an effective teacher is a feeling that cannot be easily observed or directly recorded. The semi-structured interviews were selected, therefore, as the data collection method for the present study because it is considered the best way to "find out what is on people's mind-what they think or how they feel about something" (Fraenkel and Wallen, 2006, p.455). It is most effective to research about students' experience in interacting with their teachers by asking them to directly explain their feelings in their own words (Seidman, 2006). Face-to-face interviews are also effective in handling apparent contradictions found among responses of the same participant or among responses of different participants in a group interview. 'Unusual' responses can be probed for explanations and elaborations to uncover valuable points. Also, in a face-to-face interview, participants' body movements and facial expressions can also be observed, and this can supplement a richer meaning to the interview.

Since the semi-structured interviews were utilised, interviewees were encouraged to elaborate their points if needed. Jumping back and forth among items with interviewees was quite common to clarify any problems if necessary. As Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2000) suggest, interviews are usually carried out in a fashion "where a schedule is prepared but it is sufficiently open-ended to enable the contents to be re-ordered, digressions and expansions made, new avenues to be included, and further probing to be undertaken" (p.146). At the end of each interview, interviewees were invited to further add any points they wanted.

The eighteen interviewees (fourteen females and four males) were recent graduates from a targeted local community college (Community College). Regarding programmes of study, twelve interviewees were from business related programmes, two from Health Studies, two from Applied Social Studies and two from Arts. The higher number of female interviewees reflected the fact that business programmes were popular among female students. Students who had been enrolled in the classes taught by the researchers were not interviewed to avoid any possible conflict of interest claims. As these graduates had already left their school, the researchers had to contact them through the snowball sampling techniques (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2000). To protect the privacy of the interviewees, all names shown in this study are pseudonyms.

Ten students were interviewed in the first batch. Data collected were briefly scanned after the first batch to determine if any arising issues should be further investigated in the following interviews. A few more students were then interviewed, and the data were analysed to see if data saturation had been reached (that no more new code could be generated). In this study, data saturation was reached after twelve interviews, which was consistent with the study of Guest, Bunce and Johnson (2006) where data saturation of purposive non-probability sampling was achieved within the first twelve interviews. Nonetheless, eighteen interviewed were conducted eventually such that the targeted sample size was achieved.

Data analysis

For the current study, all interview data associated with students' perception were analysed by means of qualitative analysis. Qualitative analysis is effective in discovering patterns, coherent themes, and meaningful categories. It uncovers new ideas and improves understanding of a phenomenon or process. The depth unfolded by qualitative analysis is believed by many to be the best method for understanding the complexity of education problems (Suter, 2006).

After each interview, the tape was transcribed word-for-word by a research assistant who previously had helped to prepare the transcripts of the pilot studies. The transcripts were then double-checked by the researchers for accuracy, and any errors or omissions were corrected. When final transcripts were prepared, they were sent to the interviewees who were interested for comments or corrections. No interviewees had indicated there was any error in their transcripts. All interviews were conducted in

Chinese (Cantonese). As subtle meanings may be blurred or lost during translation, transcription and analyses of the interviews were implemented in Chinese. All data were translated into English only at the final stage of the analysis when the results were presented. The final translation version was checked by a qualified translator, and differences between his translation and the researchers' were discussed and reconciled.

Finally, thematic analysis was used in this study to interpret the data obtained from interviews. While many scholars, for example: Attride-Stirling, (2001) and Boyatzis, (1998) have described the process of thematic analysis in many different fashions, the present study followed the method as suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006) for its clarity in steps and explanations, along with useful examples.

Findings

At the end of the thematic analysis process, four final main themes: *Knowledge Skills*, *Human Skills*, *Technical Skills* and *Others Traits* were identified as the characteristics of an effective teacher. The main theme that is most essential for this current study is the *Human Skills*. *Human Skills* involved the abilities to work well with other people both individually and in a group. In this case, *human skills* of teachers included any abilities or techniques that teachers need to deal with students as human beings. Teachers with good *human skills* know how to communicate, motivate, lead, inspire enthusiasm and build trust. Similar to good actors, teachers with good human skills can utilise their language, facial expressions, gesture and body language to cast a suitable image to establish a proper relation with their students.

There are different aspects in human skills. One of the key aspects of human skills is establishing the proper psychological stage in students so that they are willing to interact with the teachers. Students must have *trust* in teachers before they will approach the teacher. Emotionally, they must believe that teachers will *not hurt* them psychologically. Academically, they must have *assurance* of the correctness of the teachers' answers before they will listen to them. These points are considered very important by students.

Trust and Emotional belief

Trust and *assurance* are both subthemes of Human Skills. The word *trust* was mentioned so many times in interviews that a special discussion on it is therefore appropriate. An analysis in this regard revealed that students used this word to indicate two different things - their *emotional belief* on personal *friendliness* of the teacher, and their *assurance* on the *technical correctness* of what the teacher said.

Students prefer a teacher whom they can trust. That is, they believe that the teacher will be friendly and do not cause students any emotional harm. This is similar to the Benevolence concept described by Colquitt, Scott and LePine (2007) - student wanted a teacher who would be willing to protect and save their 'faces'. In the example of Amy¹,

an interviewee, if she perceived that the teacher was not friendly, she would be scared:

"When he is very serious, I will feel that...will he consider me stupid because I have asked such a simple question." (400624)²

She would be afraid that the teacher might be "laughing at her" (400644) and she was scared that she "may feel very bad" (400634) if she had to interact with the teacher. These fears of being emotionally hurt by the teacher would prevent her from contacting the teacher and getting her problems solved.

Furthermore, if she felt that she can trust the teacher and the teacher would not cause her any emotional harm, she would raise her hand and ask questions.

"But if he is nice and he treats me like a friend, then it will be more convenient and I will be more active, if I have any questions, I will ask him directly." (400616)

Another student Oscar supported this argument:

"If you take his subject, you are required to listen to him. But if you have some questions after the lecture ... and if he (the teacher) is not approachable ... you dare not ask him (questions) ... then it may affect the learning process ... you may ask another teacher or discuss the problem with other students ... or you may search the internet or look up some books ... so it will be less effective." (460044 ~ 460064)

In dealing with teachers, students emphasise that a teacher should act as a 'friend'-someone with an 'equal' status. Hence, teachers should not "put on his superior manner." (400602) Students want teachers to be friendly because they are afraid that if they ask an unfriendly teacher to explain something, they would be mocked, criticised or belittled - in other words, they are afraid that they may lose faces. Similar fear toward teachers is also reported by Cotten and Wilson (2006) in their study of the interaction between US undergraduate students and their teachers. They find students avoid interacting with teachers because students are uncertain, or even skeptical, that teachers are interested in interacting with them. In many cases, students are intimidated by teachers because they had had bad experiences with other teachers. As expressed by one of their interviewees in Cotten and Wilson's (2006) study:

"... they make you feel like an idiot. And it's their demeanor, it is the way they speak to you, it's the tone of voice that they use, and it's the hurriedness of their body language. Like, you're wasting my time, you're in my space, get out. Or, you know, they just make you feel like you're another number and you're completely unimportant" (Cotten and Wilson, 2006:501).

Hence students are fearful of their teacher because they are uncertain whether they will be psychologically mistreated by their teachers. The impact of such uncertainty is

much stronger on community college students. They are often perceived as 'loser' students (Wong, 2011) with relatively high sense of insecurity, hence, more sensitive to even slight signs of belittlement. The situation is made more complicated by the fact that these students may also have a relatively strong need of social status among their peers. They do not easily accept any indication of their shortcomings - even if those are true. One of the interviewees, Fred, explained the situation clearly with one example. Students do not believe that it is their fault that they cannot understand or remember something. As a matter of fact, they will reject any suggestions of such deficiencies; hence teachers should handle any negative comments tactfully.

"I am not saying the teacher should accept the (student's) wrong answer; I am saying that the teacher should use a good method to make students reconsider... he should not tell them directly that they are wrong ... the teacher should use a more appropriate method and not be so straight forward." (371377 ~ 371389)

Teachers should be highly sensitive when it comes to saving faces or feelings of students. In the less damaging case, teachers who fail to do so will scare off or alienate the more passive students, and "students will not communicate with the teacher again" (371375). In the worst case, nevertheless, students who felt their self-image threatened may start confrontation against their teachers.

Rogers (2003) proposed that adult learners assumed two identities at the same time:

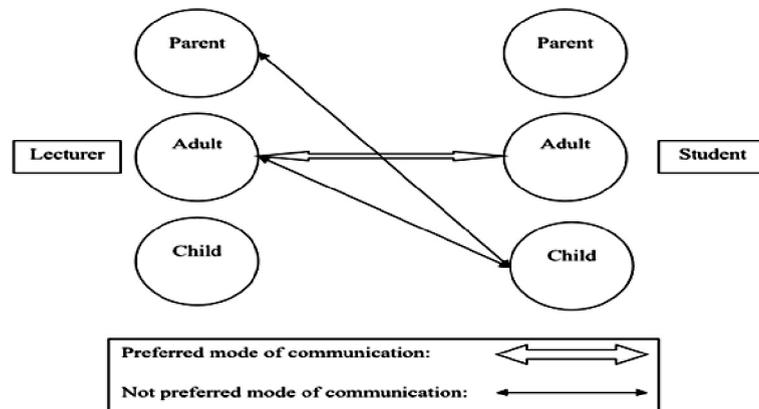
"For many, their construct of 'adult' (autonomous, responsible and mature) will contradict their construct of 'student' (incomplete, dependent on the teacher, in deficit). Much will depend on their previous experiences of schooling, whether they see their adult engagement with learning-conscious learning as similar to or different from their previous engagement with such learning. They will construct the teacher/facilitator in different ways." (Rogers, 2003:16).

For some students, their identities as an autonomous adult are actually in conflict with their identities as a dependent student. They are afraid that they may have to scarify their adulthood in the process of learning. Therefore, they feel the threat when teachers take on a superior position of 'carrying a superior air' or 'wearing a scowl'. They will shy away from teachers because they do not want to put their adulthood at risk by being forced to take on the role as a student. On the other hand, if teachers take on an equal status and "treat them as friend", the relationship will move to a much more comfortable adult-adult relationship level.

Reverting to transactional analysis discussed in the beginning of the paper, students have a tendency to yearn for an equal-level (Adult-Adult) relationship with their teachers and they will prevent any possibilities of being forced to adopt a junior (Adult-Child) or even inferior (Parent-Child) position (See Exhibit 1). On the other hand, some community college students are 'novice adult' who may still be comfortable with the

past role of 'child/student' and submit to the control of the teachers. However, some may have already commenced the role of 'adult', and thus demand a more equal status with teachers. That is why the indication of wanting the teacher to act as their 'friends' can be heard in many occasions.

Exhibit 1: Preferred and not preferred mode of communication



National culture

Chinese societies like Hong Kong have high power distance, and inequalities in power distribution are prevalent and accepted (Jackson and Bak, 1998). Community college students in Hong Kong are much younger students who recently graduated from high schools. Traditionally, they still keep a much higher respect for senior and accepted the status difference as a fact of life (Walker and Dimmock, 2000). A graduate, Barbara, has explained in an interview that why "a teacher should be *respectful* to the students" is not that important:

"To a certain degree, a little mocking or joking is nothing, it is acceptable, and everyone just laugh. It is not really necessary to be polite to students. Well, it is O.K. if the teacher is polite, even if he is not, I do not see it as a big problem ... I see teacher as an authority. It is not necessary for them to be too friendly like going to Karaoke together (with the students). I am kind of traditional in this respect." (310446 ~ 310448)

This situation is more acute for male students. A male student, Fred, declared clearly in his interview, "If a teacher who cannot be a good friend (to the students), he cannot be a good teacher" (370172). For students who desire to play the role of adults, their reaction to the denial of such rights can be very strong. Robinson (2005, p.19), in a study of secondary school students, reports that "... the importance of popularity, acceptance and young men's fears within male peer group cultures" may propel male students to participate in aggressive behaviours that they would normally avoid.

Confrontation of this kind, even in its more subtle form like complaining to the school, can be damaging to the teacher-student relationship (Jenkins, 2008). Open confrontation can be destructive to a classroom environment. Therefore, teachers must be very skillful in handling their power relationship with their students.

Assurance

In many occasions, students also used the same word *Trust* to indicate a very different meaning - the *assurance* they have on the technical correctness or truthfulness of the knowledge or information provided by the teacher. For example, Jenny indicated:

"(What you teach) must be true, must be accurate ... I attend your class, I listen to you, I have complete trust in you ... if you (the teacher) make any mistake, you must correct it. It is not an issue of behaviour or integrity... For teaching ... whatever you teach, you have to be 100% sure (what you teach) are true." (350464 ~ 350472)

Another interviewee Carol explained:

"(If the teacher knows more than what is included in the textbook) ... I will feel he is more reliable, more like a teacher ... he knows more than I do ... I will have more faith in what he says." (320211 ~ 320217)

Students rely on their teachers as their primary source of knowledge and show low interest in searching for information and knowledge elsewhere. Teachers who cannot create assurance in an accuracy of the information are considered as ineffective; students will have no faith in what the teacher says and subsequently lose interest in his or her teaching. Hence, teachers must maintain this assurance by being well-prepared for their classes. Students' assurance toward a teacher can also be improved if the teacher uses more current examples for teaching. Ivy said:

"If you (the teacher) use the same materials all the time, the students will doubt whether the teacher had just prepared one version of the notes once, and then he has used it for many years ... A lot of examples that were listed in the textbook were old and very distant from us ... I feel they may not be very useful to us ... but if you use some more current examples ... I will feel that those stuff I study can actually be useful ... and (those examples) make it easier to understand ... Many of those information change all the time, if you don't use the latest information, I will doubt whether the situation may have changed, and what you are telling me are no longer true ... I feel the current information is more true." (340502 ~ 340527)

Hence, those two different aspects of trust are both salient in determining an effectiveness of a teacher. The first aspect, *emotional belief* influences to what degree the students are willing to approach the teacher and solve their learning difficulties. The

second aspect, the *assurance* affects the students' interests in listening to their teachers.

Discussions

The major findings of this study are orientated toward the relational factor of students' fear which can be compared with other studies such as Cotten and Wilson (2006). Students are afraid of losing 'faces' and will not take the risk of being rejected by their teachers for asking questions that may be considered as 'too simple' (Cotten and Wilson, 2006). While many students have indicated that a strong fear of their teachers, their recurrent fear is so strong that they would eschew contacts with their teachers. Without specific indication of prior bad experiences, it is not clear why students develop such strong fear. Some authors (for example, Kowner and Wiseman, 2003) try to explain this as a status-related behaviour in the culture. Kabir (2007) argues that some Asian teachers showed extreme authoritarian attitude toward their students.

In reality, tertiary institutions in Hong Kong, self-financing ones in particular, often emphasise "caring in teaching" and teachers are expected to treat students very nicely. Also, student feedback questionnaires are prevalent and complaining channels are easily accessible by students in these institutions, so it is reasonable to say that the balance of power had shifted in favour of the students (Lau, 2016). It is not very likely that teachers of the students in tertiary education will show any extreme authoritarian attitude or any abrasive behaviour like scolding to their adult students. Even students may have claimed they are fearful of their teachers, their charges are only: "the teacher carries a superior air" or "the teacher always wears a scowl"; no extreme behaviours like scolding or worse have ever been reported. Given that the presence of teacher is a fear triggering factors in classrooms, what is the cause of such strong fear in students' minds?

Apparently, community college students are not fearful of the teacher as a person. According to the personal observation of the authors gaining from teaching for years in tertiary educational institutions, students are not afraid of their lecturers, and students demonstrated this through various acts of resistance (Moltz, 2009; Alberts, Hazen and Theobald, 2010). So, the fear involved is more like the fear of the humiliation which they perceived that they may have to suffer when they interact with the teacher. In the above discussion, it is suggested that the power relationships between teachers and students are influenced by the expected roles played by the students and the teachers (Rogers, 2003). The students' fear is originated from their worries, and they may be forced to degenerate from an "adult" role to "child/student" role. Further study in this regard about community college students is needed to testify the above idea.

It is apparent that different students prefer different teachers in terms of teacher qualities and teaching styles. For instance, male students like to consider themselves as someone with equal status (friends) to their teachers, and they would consider asking someone of equal status for help as showing weakness. Female students tend to have a better view of their teachers than male students (Jules and Kutnick, 1997; Poon and Lau,

2016, 2017) and they accept the teachers' superiority in social status. Hence, even if the teachers were unfriendly, female students would accept it more readily and take it as a price they have to pay for getting their answers. That is why even in the classroom that is highly dominated by teachers, female students still perceived their environment more favourably than male students (Coll, Taylor and Fisher, 2002). As revealed by the current study, it is likely that gender has effect on the way students feel about their teachers. Further research is needed in this area which is to confirm this gender difference and to find out how it should be handled properly.

This study has revealed that teachers with good human skills can effectively establish a better student-teacher relationship, but it is not exactly clear how teachers can project a proper image of open-mind and how they demonstrate their goodwill. Past researchers have suggested using interpersonal variables like verbal and nonverbal teacher immediacy (Sanders and Wiseman, 1990); caring (Teven and McCroskey, 1997); self-disclosure (Cayanus, 2004); and use of social media like Facebook (Mazer, Murphy and Simonds, 2007). Teachers should take a contingency approach and experiment with different ways before they find the technique that work best for their own students. This echoes with Wehrwein, Lujan, and DiCario (2007) hypothesise that using students' varied learning style preferences to improve student motivation and performance can be done by adapting teaching approaches, and that learning style preferences are "the manner in which, and the conditions under which, learners most efficiently and effectively perceive, process, store, and recall what they are attempting to learn...students have a variety of learning style preferences" (p.153).

To illustrate, while students in the study of Buskist et. al. (2002) prefer a teacher who can remember them by their names, students from Cotten and Wilson's (2006) study find such a teacher threatening. In the current study, students cited social interaction like "going to karaoke together" as an example of friendly behaviours. This can be compared with Lau's (2016) study that students prefer teachers who could share common interests with their students outside the classroom and regard the student as an important individual. While not every teacher may find this approach of 'befriending students' of much younger age to be something easy to accept, younger teachers, especially those who graduated from university not too long ago, may find it easier to take up the role of service providers (Ling, 2012) and 'serve' their students (Wilkenson, 1992). Mature teachers who espouse the more traditional view which entails teacher superiority (Gu, 2001) will have to try much harder to relinquish their traditional dominant role of a knowledge provider (Huo, 2006). Similarly, teachers who treasure their personal privacy may find it hard to attract students by self-disclosure as suggested by Cayanus (2004).

Conclusion

This study has offered an alternative perspective to demonstrate that fear and trust between teacher and student communication could affect student learning and performance. The current study reckons that relational factors of communication play a

significant role in the transaction between teachers and students. The focus on students' knowing and doing, however, limits teacher-student interaction from its most authentic sense where positive and negative feelings are inevitably involved. While traditional boundaries are inevitably stretched under the momentous changes in the environment (Salmi, 2001), controversies intensifying across boundaries of academic disciplines and skills have generated heat which demands different ways of cooling down (Strathern, 2008). In terms of learning encounter, despite communication takes a pivotal role, whether it is effective should depend on how capable it can cross the subject boundaries (Woods, 2006). It is obvious that students have different voices within and among the subject disciplines but these voices are often vulnerable because they are often suppressed if not fractured (Batchelor, 2008). These are the ontological voices of students which reveal the inner nature and vulnerable aspects of student personal identities. The present study advocates that, given the necessary spaces, teacher-student communication can be enhanced such that student's ontological voice can be authenticated and reinstated.

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Notes

1. All names shown are pseudonym.
2. The number inside the bracket, for example (400624) refers to the serial number of the quote in the interview transcript.

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