

Think Tank: Student to Student

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While we are devoting a whole issue to student-to-student relationships, let's not overlook the importance of teacher-to-student relationships. While online interactions became the mainstay of classroom practice for teachers around the world during 2020's COVID-19 pandemic, perhaps you, as I did, felt the loss of in-person interactions with your students. In Australia, as school students moved to home-based learning during the pandemic, some teachers did their best to reassure students that they would soon be reunited in person by making humorous [videos like this one](#). However, as the year progressed, it became harder to keep up the jokes. When would we be with our students in person again? And why did we miss them so much?



Perhaps because the loss of our "normal" classroom environment in 2020 reduced our ability to nurture relationships in person with our students. Research on [attachment-based teaching](#) emphasizes the built-in tendency for young learners to attach to their caregivers, whether that be parents or teachers. It suggests that students learn best when teachers prioritize relationships, emotions, and social needs in the classroom. This type of teaching develops the brain's executive functions in the [prefrontal cortex](#), the area of the brain which plays a role in developing students' social skills and their ability to regulate emotions. Those promoting an attachment-based teaching approach believe that teachers who focus on nurturing positive relationships with their students will see improved results in students' learning and

behavior (Cozolino, 2013). In 2020, many of us were forced to find alternative, online-friendly ways to build relationships with our learners.

Relationships are important for students, but for teachers too. Psychologist [Louis Cozolino](#) reminds us that "as human beings, we need to connect with our students as much as they need to connect with us" (2013, p. 265). There is research suggesting that our brains receive "social rewards" from giving love and positive affirmation to others,

and that these are more valuable than physical or monetary rewards (Lieberman, 2013). Areas of the brain associated with reward are activated when we give to others (Bhanji & Delgado, 2013), and so it feels good to contribute positively to the social and emotional needs of our students.

We have finally adapted to online teaching and learning, so now we are ready for the next step: to find new ways to bond with our learners. That will not be easy, but I find it helpful to realize that there are brain-based reasons for doing so, reasons that explain why I missed the face-to-face classroom and how the relationships with my students that had been a huge part of my teaching life prior to 2020. So now the next adventure awaits: to explore what the "new normal" of attachment-based, socially-rewarding teaching might look like in future online environments. After all, in a classroom that embraces student-to-student interactions, online or not, the relationships we build with our learners has a direct impact on the ones they build with each other.

References and further reading

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