Communication and Connection:

The Power of Technology to Shape Networks and Develop Social and Relational Capital

Dr Rob Loe
INTRODUCTION

Relationships Matter
WHO AM I?
Our Projects

We’re committed to seeing change happen. We also believe that the best way to learn about relationships is through practical initiatives working with others. Sometimes we start our own projects which are time limited or which spin-off on their own. And sometimes we come across people with a passion for relationships who have what it takes to make a difference. We may simply advise and support them but occasionally we incubate their ideas and projects until they’re ready to spin-off. Collectively these projects illustrate the importance of relationships in different areas of life, and the potential to tackle the big issues through focussing on relationships.

(1994) Relational Justice
Repairing the Breach

(1999) Relational Healthcare
Strengthening inter-professional relationships

Relational Peacebuilding
Strengthening inter-professional relationships

Relational Schools Project
So children can build a society
Relational matters: A review of the impact of school experience on mental health in early adolescence

Colleen McLaughlin & Barbie Clarke

The review of this area posed the notion of ‘the supportive school’ as important and one key element, the notion of school communities. Within that, the role of relationships is identified as significant. This paper explores the part played by relationships in schools. The paper draws on a review of 133 papers published recently in the last 15 years. Relationships between teachers and pupils and pupils’ peer relationships are identified as the key ones. The main ways in which school-based relationships impact upon mental health are explained. First, in terms of the relationship to academic outcomes; second, the relationship between social support, feelings of emotional well-being or distress, and teacher-pupil relationships; and finally the relationship between teacher communities and mental health outcomes. The authors argue for greater attention to be paid to the relationships between the relationships of young people and their emotional and academic well-being. The paper concludes with the implications for schools and teachers of these findings and an argument for an acknowledgement of the importance of the social goals of education.
“Relationships involve a series of interactions between two individuals who know each other such that each interaction can be influenced by past interactions and by expectations of interactions in the future.”

Robert Hinde (1997)  
Relationships: A Dialectical Perspective Psychology Press p.48
“The literature base for this is decades old and internationally uniform”
“It is not new to argue that relationships matter but the body of evidence is now large and powerful”

Prof. Colleen McLaughlin
AUSTRALIAN SCHOOLS DATASET

Overall student wellbeing

Student to student Relational Proximity

- **69 n = 2853**
- **71 n = 5056**
- **73 n = 7490**

Student to teacher Relational Proximity

- **67 n = 1845**
- **71 n = 1008**
- **73 n = 1531**
- **77 n = 672**
- **69 n = 190**
- **77 n = 1617**
- **74 n = 48**
- **83 n = 579**

RELATIONSHIPS PROTECT
2007 - iPhone Released

2012 - Smartphone Ownership Crossed 50% Threshold
Consider any individual at any period of his life, and you will always find him preoccupied with fresh plans to increase his comfort.

Alexis de Tocqueville
December 4th this day I have been ill, not well done but little been at home all day regulated some things this evening feel better in my mind then I have for a few days back. Oh Lord deliver thy servant out of temptations and fill his heart with wisdom.
THE RESEARCH

To what extent is technology a facilitator of, or barrier to, relational health...
Communication is a key driver of social connectedness and the foundation of true happiness, but new technologies often accelerate social isolationism and hyper-individualism.

How can we exploit the digital tools around us to encourage deep engagement and shared flourishing?
“The connections between people in schools are a driving force in shaping engagement with school [and] this sense of belonging influences well-being, academic outcomes and social development, short and long term”

Prof. Colleen McLaughlin
UNPACKING CONNECTION

- **It’s not just a “feeling”:** it is shaped by the ways we interact and creates a context in which the value of relationships can be realised.

- **Both parties need be fully present:** it is not filtered out by the way in which we communicate and that in turn does not impede the quality of communication.

- **It endures and deepens over time** – trust and understanding build up.

- **It has bandwidth** – connection may take place in different contexts (e.g. extra-curricular) and embraces the whole person (their full range of skills, interests as well as the challenges they face).

- **There is respectful freedom** – it is not an unequal yoke of coercive control. Both parties willingly invest in the continuing maintenance of connection.

- **It begins with a sense of shared purpose** - there is a gravitational pull rooted in values and purpose that maintains alignment despite other pressures and influences.
“Media can be used to nourish relationships, but to harness their capabilities, habits need to be established around practices of connection.”

[Jeffrey Hall Relating Through Technology: advances in personal relationships p.207]
Whom should we thank for the benefits of technology that we enjoy?

Whom should we blame for the bugs?
SOME QUESTIONS ALL SCHOOLS ASK...

- Are schools creating a “relational medium” and climate as they adopt new technologies?
- What should we learn from the accelerated use of technology during Covid?
- ‘I think we’re doing OK but how do we know – are other people doing it differently or better?’
- Is this a good use of time and money?
THE CONTEXT OF THE RESEARCH

Builds on earlier IBSC commissioned reports:

- Reichert & Hawley (2010, 2013) on the ‘relational gestures’ that are important for boys’ learning and the responsibility of the teacher to take the lead in shaping relationships.

- UCL Knowledge Lab literature review on building learning relationships through the use of technology.

- Surveys of school representatives, staff and parents open to all IBSC schools.

- 257 teacher responses and 654 parent responses received from 17 schools in 7 countries, with 16 school representatives from 7 different countries also providing an overview of the schools’ use of technology.

- More detailed measurement of relationship and reviews of technology use.

- 7 schools: 106 classes surveyed representing 1,914 pupils and 94 distinct class teachers.

- Data collected on 1,830 teacher-student relationships and 40,432 student-student relationships.
# BELONGING IN SCHOOL

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>OECD Measure of School Belonging</th>
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<th>OECD %</th>
<th>Difference</th>
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IBSC above average (negative statements reverse scored)
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*IBSC above average (negative statements reverse scored)
The authors looked in more detail at both student-student and student-teacher relationships. Each student was asked 3 questions about every other student in their class:

- “This person and I have frequent positive interactions either in class or outside it”
- “I am confident that this person and I know each other’s skills and interests”
- “I feel that this person values and respects my contributions in class”

Teachers were also asked about each student in their class.
MEASURING THEIR VALUE

Teachers were also asked about each student in their class:

- “My communication with this student is highly effective”
- “Our relationship has a strong 'story' or timeline”
- “I know this student well”
- “Our relationship is fair and respectful’
- “We are aligned in purpose”
Overall student wellbeing

AUSTRALIAN SCHOOLS DATASET

Student to student
Relational Proximity
0 - 60

73
n = 7490

Student to student
Relational Proximity
61 - 100

71
n = 5056

Student to teacher
Relational Proximity
0 - 69

69
n = 2853

Years 8 - 12

Student to teacher
Relational Proximity
70 - 100

74
n = 2203

Years 8 - 12

Student to teacher
Relational Proximity
61 - 81

77
n = 1807

Years 6 - 7

Student to teacher
Relational Proximity
82 - 100

83
n = 627

Years 6 - 7

Student to teacher
Relational Proximity
0 - 68

69
n = 1531

Years 8 - 12

Student to teacher
Relational Proximity
69 - 100

77
n = 1617

Years 6 - 7

Student to teacher
Relational Proximity
0 - 65

74
n = 48

Years 6 - 7

Student to teacher
Relational Proximity
66 - 100

83
n = 579

Years 6 - 7
A DECENTRALISED NETWORK
UNPACKING CONNECTION

• **It’s not just a ‘feeling’**: it is shaped by the ways we interact and creates a context in which the value of relationships can be realised.

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• **It endures and deepens over time** – trust and understanding build up

• **It has bandwidth** – connection may take place in different contexts (e.g. extra-curricular) and embraces the whole person (their full range of skills, interests as well as the challenges they face)

• **There is respectful freedom** – it is not an unequal yoke of coercive control. Both parties willingly invest in the continuing maintenance of connection

• There is a gravitational pull rooted in values and purpose that maintains alignment despite other pressures and influences
THE SOCIAL NETWORK
The types of networks connecting the geographical cluster of nodes
NETWORK TYPES

Centralized
NETWORK TYPES

Decentralized
NETWORK TYPES

Distributed
SOCIAL NETWORK ANALYSIS
A third classroom – high wellbeing

Sex

Wellbeing
But could we begin to predict loneliness?
• Students tend to cluster relationally with those who share a similar sense of belonging in the school as a whole.
• Adolescents crave the time and connection with their friends, but lack opportunities, time and space to hang out turn to social and personal media to connect (Boyd 2014 in Hall p.197).
• If one’s need to belong is met in the face-to-face interactions of school (and home) then less pressure to seek belonging through technology mediated interactions outside of it.
• Prolonged isolation is a better predictor of social media use, rather than vice versa.
• Building a culture of connection in class therefore helps to scaffold the use of technology in seeking connection.
The study focused on four types of technology:

1. personal portable hardware;
2. school-managed virtual learning environments (VLEs);
3. software-supported learning tasks; and
4. software-assisted monitoring for in-class or extra-curricular task completion and assessment.

The report we are sharing today has data from school on what technologies they plan to deploy more, which technologies teachers said were important in the last lesson they taught and the benefits and drawbacks for both teacher-student and student-student relationships
HOW TECHNOLOGY IS USED

<table>
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<th>PPH</th>
<th>VLE</th>
<th>Learning tasks</th>
<th>Monitoring</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Facilitating student and/or staff collaboration</td>
<td>Facilitating staff and/or student communication</td>
<td>Improved pedagogic practice</td>
<td>Facilitating a broader picture of student progress</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ease of access to better learning tasks</td>
<td>Ease of access to learning tasks</td>
<td>Access to specialised subject matter delivery</td>
<td>Evidencing the learning process</td>
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<td>Facilitating student and/or staff communication</td>
<td>Facilitating staff and/or student collaboration</td>
<td>Ease of learning experience repetition</td>
<td>Increasing individual agency in the learning process</td>
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WHAT DID TEACHERS SAY?

Benefits of technology for teacher-student relationships
WHAT DID TEACHERS SAY?

Benefits for peer relationships
Students value the relational experience of learning – they want to be in class with those they know.

They would prefer to trade some personalisation for the collective experience of learning together.

What the students say is ‘email is for teachers’ – out of class collaboration utilises more informal channels. Building a positive culture helps to scaffold this. WhatsApp groups won’t always be healthy and positive for all students all the time.
“Relationships involve a series of interactions between two individuals who know each other such that each interaction can be influenced by past interactions and by expectations of interactions in the future.”

Robert Hinde (1997)

Relationships: A Dialectical Perspective Psychology Press p.48
Students recognise that technology opens up many distractions – not all are good at managing this and it concerns them.

Access to resources and a wide range of tasks valued by students – but does it aid learning?

In person feedback valued over the written or automated – students feel they learn more from it.
• Managing accessibility – students value the convenience of quick connection but recognise the value of face-to-face far more particularly where there are difficult questions or a need for support.

• Teachers who had a more optimistic view of technology also had more positive perceptions of their relationships with each of their pupils. The biggest effect size was found in the ‘storyline’ question. This suggests that the relational benefit of these technologies is most significant where they are helping to scaffold the narrative thread of the relationship.

• The relationship survey data indicated that teachers in pastoral classes reported weaker relationships with students. In this context it was interesting to note that teachers reported valuing the ability of school systems to help build better knowledge of pupils but progress must be personalised and provide alerts for all students.
CONNECTING WITH THE TECH

• Make decisions about the use and adoption of technology within a wider whole-school strategy for building and sustaining the relationships.

• The factors shaping the relationships between students vary between schools and classes. Understanding the factors that cause relationships to cluster in your school can help to identify those students at risk of greater isolation and help to broaden collaborative working.

• Staff time and expertise is a limiting factor for both how much and how well some technology is used. Time and support need to be costed in any implementation plans, with ease of use and implementation being an important factor in technology choices.

• The perceived benefits of software supported learning are closely tied to their perceived pedagogic benefits. These vary by subject, age of student and teaching style. Implementation of technology should be driven by clearly articulated goals for pedagogical improvements which staff are committed to implement in their classes, with any technology being an enabler rather than a driver of this.
Students’ knowledge of each other’s skills and interests varies considerably. There is a need to recognise the factors in your school that enable pupils to build better understanding of some more than others and harness the collaborative opportunities of technology such as direct messaging or shared experience in a simulation space to build a more cohesive group.

- There is a need to focus as much on how technology supports collaboration as individualised personalization of learning.
- The relationships you build with students, and the relationships between students that you foster, are valued and are a key factor in student wellbeing and learning outcomes.
- IBSC schools are using highly relational low tech off-campus learning to build relationships.
TO ENGAGE FURTHER...

IBSC webinars

• **Webinar 1**: Current Implications for Boys’ Schools: The Impact of Technology on Pedagogy and School Culture  
  Tuesday, September 12 (4 PM EDT, which is 9 PM UK time)

• **Webinar 2**: Future Implications for Boys’ Schools: Responding to Emerging Technologies  
  Thursday, September 14 (4 PM EDT, which is 9 PM UK time)

Or contact: j.griffin@relationshipsfoundation.org or j.ashcroft@relationshipsfoundation.org
QUESTIONS