

# Chapter 9

## Teaching as Relationship



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**Abstract** Loder (The Transforming Moment, 1989) remarks on the paradox that, although conventional science values knowing that is grounded in demonstrable facts, history testifies that deep and transforming truths are inexorably conceived through human imagination. This understanding presents all teachers with a challenge, a challenge to fashion an environment of learning where not only is content and process valued but where students are encouraged to ‘draw deeply on personal intuition and the creative unconscious’ (The Transforming Moment, p 49, 1989). Such an environment speaks of a relationship between teacher and learner that transcends the idea of a teacher containing the knowledge the student needs and imparting that knowledge to the student. Therefore, rather than focusing on teaching and learning from a theoretical stance, this chapter endeavours to address (The Transforming Moment, 1989) challenge by examining the elements of teaching as a relationship that has the capacity to conceive deep, transforming knowing. Core to this relationship is the Trinitarian concept of *perichoresis*, the divine dance that embraces all truth. This core is surrounded by such relational concepts as *shalom* and *agape* that create a covenantal space where the learner may not only flourish but also experience the joy of transformational knowing.

**Keywords** Teaching · Learning · Relationship · Trinity · Transformation

### 1 Introduction

Conventional science emphasizes demonstration and so tends to reduce all knowing to the shape of what can be demonstrated in terms of current facts and theory. However, the most significant knowing in the history of the sciences takes place in a way that draws deeply on personal intuition and the creative unconscious (Pétervári et al. 2016). It is as if the history of science (where rational demonstration

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is so important) testifies that what is known in and through personal being, imaginatively and transformingly conceived, is the deepest and most comprehensive truth. Yet, it does not exclude but contains as an element, which is rationally demonstrable (Loder 1989, pp. 48–49). In this passage, Loder (1989) presents all teachers everywhere with a challenge to fashion an environment of learning where not only are the conventional educational elements of content and process valued but where students are also encouraged to ‘draw deeply on personal intuition and the creative unconscious’ (p. 49) and where imaginative and transformative knowing are nurtured. Such an environment speaks of a unique relationship between teacher and learner.

This chapter endeavours to address Loder’s (1989) challenge by first examining the ‘what’ of teaching as a relationship. Second, the setting of this relationship will be explored and the elements of a safe place where the learner may flourish will be examined. Finally, the ‘why’ of teaching will lead us to an investigation of the deep and transformative learning that nurtures vocation, as the ‘emerging thread in the developing pattern of human life’ (McIntosh 2004, p. 149). Although this concept of teaching as relationship is relevant to all teaching situations, for the purposes of this chapter, references to higher education settings will be used as illustrations.

## 2 What Is the Relationship?

That the human person cannot thrive, and therefore learn, outside of relationship is fundamental knowledge that has been well researched by scholars of theology, psychology, sociology, anthropology and, more recently, by neuroscience. From the creation narrative of Genesis (Chaps. 1–3) where God proclaims, ‘it is not good for man to be alone’ (Gen 2:18 [KJV]<sup>1</sup>), the human story has been about community. Bowlby’s (1988) research into attachment, Bandura’s (1971) understandings of social learning, Erikson’s (1980) work on the psychosocial stages of human development and many others have been strong influences in the shaping of the understandings we have today of how human beings need relationship to grow, learn, develop and flourish. These concepts have been further applied by educational constructivists who support discovery learning (Hunt and Chalmers 2012, pp. 10–11) which necessarily involves a teacher/student relationship conducive to the kind of learning that transforms from the inside out (Whitaker 2012).

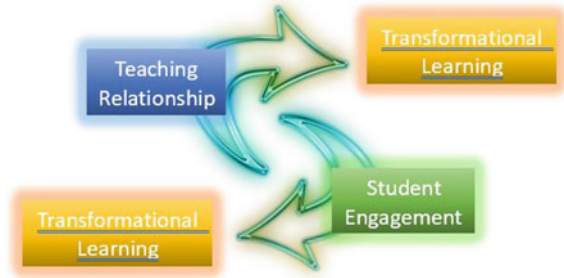
Marzano and Marzano (2003) contextualizes this for us by writing:

Teacher-student relationships provide an essential foundation for effective classroom management—and classroom management is a key to high student achievement. Teacher-student relationships should not be left to chance or dictated by the personalities of those involved. Instead, by using strategies supported by research, teachers can influence the dynamics of their classrooms and build strong teacher-student relationships that will support student learning. (p. 6)

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<sup>1</sup>All scripture quotations are from the *Holy Bible, King James Version [KJV]* (2010).

**Fig. 1** The inside-out model of teaching as relationship (Adapted from Crawford 2015)



Therefore, in order to make sense of the diversity of elements that contribute to a teaching relationship (Hattie and Yates 2013), I shall develop a ‘inside-out’ model of teaching as relationship, that is, I will begin at the relational foundations of the ‘what’, examine ‘where’ this relationship happens then explore the crucial ‘why’ teaching needs to incorporate relationship (Fig. 1).

## 2.1 The ‘What’ of Teaching as Relationship

### 2.1.1 The Vertical Relationship

At the core of all things is the Triune God. He is revealed in the scriptures as the Creator, Sustainer, Saviour and Sanctifier of all things. However, as Kelly (1989) reminds us, ‘[T]he life of God is not a life of impervious transcendence from the world, but an actual self-transcendence towards the world [...] the divine mystery, as incarnate in Jesus Christ and manifest in the gift of the Spirit, is “Be-ing-in-Love”. As such, it draws believers into its own dynamics’ (p. 147). This interaction among the three Persons of the Trinity in the affairs of each other and of mankind, unlike any human relationship, is characterized by the perfect giving and receiving of love. The Greek word *perichoresis*, meaning ‘dance’, is a metaphor that is often used to illustrate the dynamic intimacy of the Trinitarian relationship. Just as dancers seem to move as one, so too is the intimacy of the Father, Son and Spirit expressed as a graceful ‘dance’.

It would seem though, that the divine mystery Kelly (1989) alludes to, is not an exclusive relationship but that God’s people, made in His image, are also drawn into the very life of God and enfolded in His grace. This enfolding grace is seen in the prayer of Jesus in the Gospel of John, Chap. 17 where Jesus invites us into a conversation between the Father and the Son. Not only does this dialogue give insight to the intimacy of the relationship Jesus has with the Father but it also expresses the longing He has that all would experience the oneness that is represented by the Trinitarian relationship. The depth of meaning that this holds for a Christian is simply expressed by St Paul as he seeks to convince the philosophers of

Athens of the nearness and relationality of God: ‘In Him I live and move and have my being’ (Acts 17:28).

Another aspect of God’s desire for relationship with His people is ‘the purpose of drawing us out of ourselves, away from our own self-preoccupation, self-absorption, self-fixation, so as to participate in the divine life’ (Downey 2000, p. 79). Jesus taught the Pharisees this principle when he responded to their question regarding the greatest commandment: ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like it: You shall love your neighbour as yourself’ (Matt 22:37-39). Therefore, divine life is not just our relationship with God but also includes an awareness of the relationships we have with ourselves and those in our sphere of influence.

But what, may you ask, does this divine relationship have to do with what happens in our classrooms? In answer to that question, I return to the ‘inside-out’ concept already mentioned here. If, as previously quoted by Paul, the Christian teacher lives, moves and has his being in God, this divine relationship represents the foundation of our lives in general and our vocation as a teacher in particular. Whether working in a Christian or secular workplace, the teacher who is a Christian lives, moves and teaches within her relationship with God. To continue the *perichoresis* metaphor, the teacher who is Christian brings her dynamic dance relationship with God with her into her classroom, represented as the ‘vertical relationship’ diagrammed (Fig. 2).

**Fig. 2** The vertical teaching relationship (Adapted from Crawford 2015)





intentional about setting them—all based on the Word of God. The exciting aspect of neuroscience is that it is now scientifically showing us what the Word of God—and Cloud and Townsend (1992)—have been saying all along: Healthy boundaries, intentionally set, provide relationships with the safe place essential for them to foster psychological, emotional, spiritual and cognitive flourishing.

The teaching relationship is no different. It also needs such healthy boundaries. The implications are that, for the teacher who desires his students to experience deep learning, the teaching environment needs to have intentional boundaries to make it a safe place. This concept is supported by the work of neuroscientists such as Grawe (2007), and Rossouw (2014) who defines a ‘safe place’ as one that decreases the anxiety generated in the ‘impulsive brain’ (the limbic system), where survival strategies preoccupy the brain’s functioning, in order to allow the ‘smart brain’ (the pre-frontal cortex) to engage so that learning can take place. The needs of the learner that must be satisfied for this to occur are for safety, control and connection (Rossouw 2014, p. 12). Therefore, to establish intentional boundaries in any teaching environment requires these needs to be addressed.

### 3.1 *The Teaching Relationship Is a Sacred Space*

In the teaching relationship unfolding here, the core of the relationship is the teacher’s willingness to live and move and have her being in the purposes of God. From the beginning, God has always surrounded his purposes with the safe boundaries of covenants, despite the constant violation of these by God’s chosen people. However, as people of the New Covenant, we can once again be assured of the safety of a covenantal relationship with God whose thoughts towards us are thoughts of peace and not of evil, and whose plans will give us a future and a hope (Jer 29:11). According to Paul in his second letter to the Corinthians:

We have such trust through Christ toward God. Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to think of anything as being from ourselves, but our sufficiency is from God, who also made us sufficient as ministers of the new covenant, not of the law but of the Spirit; for the law kills, but the Spirit gives life. (2 Cor 3:4-6)

Several significant elements are involved in the intentional building of this sacred learning space and I will use examples from my tertiary education experience to illustrate these. The first is *agape*, the unconditional love of God that is the source of our love for Him and our ability to trust His faithfulness. Nygren (1998) identifies four aspects of *agape* that faithfully reflect who God is and give insight into the transcendent power that resides in this love:

- *Agape* is spontaneous and unmotivated—in Jesus this love was clearly demonstrated as He refused to be controlled by the value of the objects of His love, freely ministering to the righteous and sinner alike;
- *Agape* is indifferent to value—it is only when all thought of worthiness of the object is abandoned that we can understand what *agape* is;

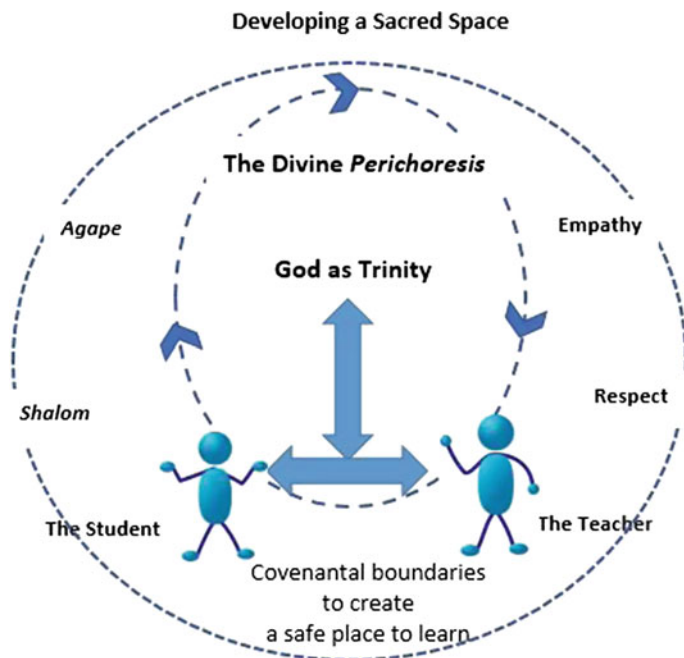
- *Agape* is creative—*agape* does not recognize value, but creates it. *Agape* loves and imparts value by loving; and
- *Agape* is the initiator of fellowship with God—not only does *agape* determine the essential and characteristic content of Christian fellowship with God, but in virtue of its creative nature it is also important for initiation of that fellowship (pp. 85–89).

In the course I teach, many of the students who enrol are mature aged students (30–60 years old), the majority of whom are women. Many of these women have had no previous tertiary education, and some are the first in their families to engage in tertiary study. Consequently, the university environment for them is a foreign and unsafe place when they first arrive. One such student had lived in the country all her life and struggled with the academic aspects of the course as well as having to travel large distances to come to class. Recognizing her determination and being inspired by her courage, her teachers, through active empathy and by drawing on the love of God, began to deconstruct the walls of fear and inadequacy that surrounded this student and intentionally construct a safe place for her to learn and flourish. Gradually, she learned to accept our encouragement and respect and she began to see herself as valuable and loved. This student went on to gain not only her degree but a confidence in herself and in the goodness of God that she is now using to inspire those she works with.

The second element seen as vital to the construction of a safe learning space is *shalom*. Often translated as ‘peace’, the Hebrew concept of *shalom* goes beyond the passive picture conjured up by this English word. The English understanding of peace is an absence of civil disturbance or hostilities, or a personality-free from internal and external strife, but the Biblical concept of *shalom* holds a deeper meaning. ‘Baker’s Evangelical Dictionary’ (Elwell 1997), from the Hebrew roots, defines *shalom* as ‘wholeness of life or body’ and as ‘right relationship or harmony between two parties or people’ (para. 1).

In Biblical terms, *shalom* is established by a covenant, described in scripture as a ‘covenant of peace’ (Ezek 34:25-26; Is 54:10; Num 25:12-13) that signifies completeness and safety. However, in keeping with the Hebrew theistic worldview (Deut 6:24), God alone is the source of peace, for He is ‘*Yahweh Shalom*’ (Is 26:3; 2 Thess 3:16).

Hence, *shalom* is an expression of the mission of God. Jesus Christ became the incarnation of ‘*Yahweh Shalom*’. As the prophesied ‘Prince of Peace’ (Is 9:6, 7), Jesus introduced mankind to the Kingdom of God, instilling the hope of reconciliation into a world fractured by broken relationships with God, self and others. As He walked the streets, reaching out to the poor, the sick and the captives, Jesus demonstrated the true meaning of *shalom* as, in His public ministry, people were healed, delivered and set free (Is 61:1; Luke 4:18). However, the Gospels also give us a glimpse of the deeper meaning of *shalom*. For example, in Jesus’ encounter with the woman caught in adultery (John 8), the grace and unconditional acceptance that He extended to this outcast not only brought resolution to the immediate situation but also transforming goodness was released to all involved in the



**Fig. 4** A sacred space for a teaching relationship (Adapted from Crawford 2015)

encounter that day. Applying this concept of *shalom* to the relationship of teaching requires the teacher to not only design a curriculum that allows students to discover, experience and accept *shalom* as a gift from God (Roux 2007, p. 137) but also to make such *shalom* principles as forgiveness and peacekeeping rather than peace-making explicit so they, as practitioners working with their own clients, will learn to create their own *shalom* presence.

It is into this sacred space, surrounded by the Spirit of life, that the Christian teacher can confidently bring his students. In such a space, the core conditions of a relationship that fosters flourishing and learning, those of safety, control and connection (Rossouw 2014), represented by the concepts of *agape*, empathy, *shalom* and respect, are all encompassed through trust in a covenant-keeping, all-powerful yet loving God. This diagram begins to illustrate these boundaries (Fig. 4).

## 4 Why Is Teaching a Relationship?

Having explored the ‘what’ and the ‘where’ of teaching as relationship, we come to the essence of this thesis, the ‘why’. As all good teachers know, the ‘why’ question seeks deeper understandings and, in doing so, raises more questions. Why do we teach? Why do we seek relationship with our students? Why do we not simply



impart knowledge? To answer these questions, we will explore the concept of ‘vocation’, not just that of the student but of the teacher also. In the definition quoted from McIntosh (2004) earlier in this chapter, vocation was described as ‘an emerging thread in the developing pattern of human life’ (p. 149), giving ‘vocation’ past, present and future connotations. My definition of vocation would probably include the fulfilment of a lifelong desire to teach or the result of my decision to leave a legacy for the future; my students often express their concept of vocation in terms of a passion to see others flourish. By revisiting the students’ personal goals relating to vocation at different times throughout their course, they are able to see a maturing of their purpose. This deeper ‘why’ is explained by McIntosh (2004) who observes that pursuing one’s vocation means becoming more ‘real’, and ‘[E]mbracing the call to relationship with others who stretch us beyond the limits even of what we thought of as ourselves, and on into a deeper truthfulness of being’ (p. 150).

In such an understanding of vocation, the mutuality of the teaching relationship is highlighted. Not only is the student responding to his vocational call but the teacher is also heeding the call to accompany the student on this part of his life’s journey. In this process, both are stretched in diverse ways—some expected and some beyond comprehension. This stretching becomes transforming as intuition, creativity and imagination lead both student and teacher on into deep and comprehensive truth.

#### ***4.1 The Teaching Relationship that is Transformational***

Throughout this chapter, it has been alluded to that teaching as relationship offers both student and teacher more than just the giving and receiving of knowledge and skills that this particular relationship, while valuing the imparting of facts and understandings, reaches higher towards the awakening of a sense of vocation and the facilitating of flourishing. We have been playing with words like ‘personal intuition’, ‘the creative unconscious’, ‘imaginatively and transformingly conceived’ and ‘*perichoresis*’. But what have such musings to do with what happens every day in the classroom? Whether conscious of it or not, our students are looking to us, the teacher to provide the safety, connection and control needed for them to learn while the teacher is always seeking the ‘ah ha’ moment that marks a transforming experience.

However, this transforming experience is not ‘happenstance’ nor is it ‘more of the same [...] Transformation always involves a perceptual shift [...]’ (Barker 1995, p. 160). This concept of ‘perceptual shift’ of a student’s understanding, although maybe not explicitly so, would be the goal of a teacher’s lesson preparation. However, while teacher training provides the tools for the cognitive aspects of teaching, it is an awareness of the dynamics of the relationship that intentionally draws the student into the power of the Trinitarian *perichoresis* that adds the transformational dimension. It is in this sacred place (as diagrammed below

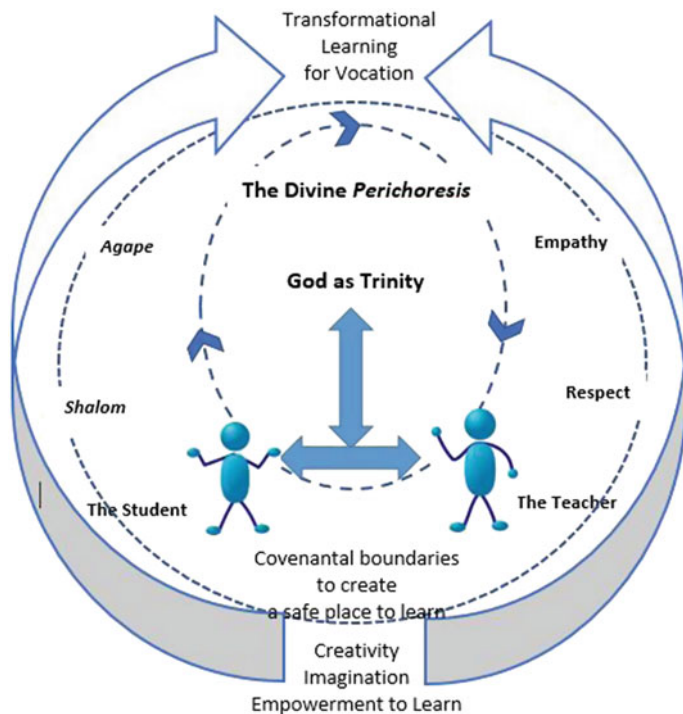


Fig. 5 Teaching as relationship model (Adapted from Crawford 2015)

in Fig. 5) that the student will find the safety, connection and control so essential for the transformative learning experience that accomplishes learning and nourishes the soul.

## 5 Limitations

There are several limitations to this study that need to be acknowledged here. The first is the strong theological foundation on which it is constructed. There are only a relatively small number of us (teachers and lecturers) who are privileged to work in explicitly Christian settings where both students and teachers can share an understanding of the place of God in their lives. However, for the Christian teacher who works in a secular school or college, an adaptation of this model may still underpin good teaching and learning practice. Although it has been beyond the scope of this chapter to consider the secular setting, further research that specifically addresses this topic of teaching as relationship in situations that are not explicitly Christian, or even hostile to a Christian worldview, could prove to be enlightening.

The second limitation to be acknowledged is that the tertiary teaching and learning, although constructed on the same pedagogical foundations as teaching

primary or high school children, does differ in the teaching delivery. Again, the length and purpose of this chapter precluded discussion on the theory associated with the differences between adult and adolescent or child learners but further investigation into these pedagogical issues could be very helpful for school teachers seeking deeper engagement with their students. It is here sufficient to say that a discussion has begun.

## 6 Conclusion

In summary, the inside-out model explored here began with the core relationship of the vertical synergy of the Triune God's willingness to enfold his children with his grace. The horizontal relationship looked at how the teacher/student relationship was drawn into this loving communion. The next element of the model highlighted the boundaries that surround and protect the vertical/horizontal, teacher/student relationship. This covenantal protection provides the all-important safety, through trust in an all-powerful God; the vertical and horizontal connections with God and the other that gives life meaning and satisfies the soul; and the empowerment required for the learning to take place. The final aspect of the model looked at the transforming learning experience that flows from a relational environment that is intentionally constructed.

Therefore, the learning gained through connection with another human being who has the capacity to inspire intuition, imagination and creativity will not only result in meaningful understanding of a particular knowledge area but it will provide opportunity for the student and teacher to share transformational moments—thus fulfilling God's vocational purpose in both of their lives.

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