



## Positive Interactions and Supportive Learning Environments: Keys to Enhanced Student Engagement

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### Abstract

*This project, based on alarming statistics about mental health among young people and students from both national and international studies, aims to investigate how a supportive learning environment can improve the mental well-being and quality of life for students facing challenges. We aim to examine how social rituals and interactions affect student engagement and well-being in the university context, primarily through the lens of Randall Collins' interaction ritual theory. Furthermore, we aim to integrate concepts from Carl Rogers' theory of personal development, focusing on his perspectives on the social aspects of learning, to enhance our understanding of factors contributing to student well-being. In this study, we base our research on the premise that students who are doing well tend to be more engaged, and conversely, those who are engaged often experience better well-being. Drawing on narratives from the Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU), as part of the "In My Experience" project, this study focuses on student narratives that describe the teacher's role in facilitating well-being. Based on a small number of informants, we have conducted a preliminary study that will lay the groundwork for a more comprehensive study in the future. The preliminary findings suggest that social rituals, cultivated within the learning environment, can act as catalysts for fostering strong bonds and a sense of community among students. These rituals, reflecting Collins' framework, appear to have a notable impact on students' well-being, although these conclusions are still tentative. Furthermore, the initial results indicate that these rituals could contribute to identity development, which seems to resonate with Rogers' views on learning as social processes. These early outcomes hint at the possibility that focusing on interaction rituals in university strategies could promote student engagement and play a key role in supporting students' overall well-being.*

**Keywords:** Student Engagement, Social Rituals, Interaction Dynamics, Personal Development

### Introduction

In this article, we explore how a supportive learning environment, characterized by positive interactions, can enhance student well-being and increase their engagement. Given the troubling statistics related to mental health from various national and international surveys on youth [1, 2], and particularly among students [3, 4], addressing this issue is crucial.

University staff play a central role in promoting student well-being [5]. They are key actors in shaping and organizing educational programs that not only contribute to knowledge but also support students' personal and academic growth. Through their work, university staff have the opportunity to create a learning environment where students feel motivated and valued, which is essential for the overall learning experience [6]. Baik et al. [7] highlights the pivotal role of university staff in mitigating stress in education. Students value teachers' empathy, clarity, community-building, and diverse teaching methods. Research also indicates that students who are thriving exhibit higher levels of engagement, and conversely, those who are more engaged tend to experience greater well-being [8].

University staff and teachers are crucial for student well-being, providing more than education by offering academic and emotional support, fostering diverse and accepting environments, and guiding students through life changes [9]. Well-being, a broad concept encompassing physical, mental, and



social aspects, is vital for students to navigate higher education challenges [10]. A study conducted by Elof, O'Neil, and Kanengoni [10], highlighted the importance of institutional recognition of lecturers' role in student support, emphasizing a holistic approach to education prioritizing student well-being as much as academic achievement. This underscores the significant role of university staff in shaping students' educational journey and overall well-being.

The aim of this study is to examine how teachers' engagement and interaction with students impact student well-being and engagement in the learning process. We do so through analysing students' own narratives, and interpret them in light of the theoretical framework we present in the following.

### **Theoretical framework**

According to Randall Collins' theory [11] of interaction ritual chains, it could be suggested that successful social rituals in the educational environment might have a considerable impact on students' engagement and well-being. This theory explains how repetitive, interconnected social rituals shape us as people and define the dynamics of our collective behavior within a group. He describes this as rituals of community that shape the individual participants and evoke a sense of belonging and respect for the group. The theory emphasizes that successful interaction rituals produce emotional energy, which is characterized by increased self-confidence, enthusiasm, and initiative among the participants. Less successful interactions will lead to the opposite feelings, the feeling of failure, and loss of energy.

Carl R. Rogers [12] addresses the topic of education, with a particular focus on learning rather than teaching. He asserts that it is more fruitful to focus on facilitating learning, as opposed to the traditional method of teaching. He emphasizes that an effective "facilitator" of learning must be genuinely present, show empathy, and treat students with care and respect. Rogers also highlights the importance of a safe and trusting environments, leading to self-directed and spontaneous learning. By creating such an environment, authentic relationships between students and teachers can develop, which he considers to be the key to deep and meaningful learning.

### **Methodology**

The article is based on narrative data gathered from the initiative titled "In My Experience", where students from the Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU) offered firsthand accounts of their academic journey. The information was compiled through an online questionnaire, with the aim of understanding the factors that influence student well-being. The original study gathered around 600 narratives. Although only a few of these narratives specifically share experiences from interactions with teachers in learning environments, the ones that do are particularly insightful. In this article, we have selected six such narratives for analysis, in which students describe their learning situations. To analyze the students' narratives, we have chosen to employ narrative analysis, a method that centers on understanding and interpreting personal stories and experiences as conveyed by the participants themselves. By directly retelling the students' stories, we aim to preserve the original context and meaning behind each narrative. Subsequently, these student narratives will be interpreted in light of Carl Rogers'[12], person-centered theory and Randall Collins'[11] interaction theory.

### **Findings**

The student narratives revealed the importance of having caring lecturers. The role of lecturers in creating a supportive learning environment seems to be important for the students well-being. Students describe in various ways the lecturer's influential role in shaping their academic and social experiences. They appreciate teachers who go beyond expectations to foster an inclusive and supportive atmosphere. This includes actions like greeting students, inquiring about their challenges, and being accessible and accommodating, as described by this student:

*"I had a teacher during the first two years of my studies who went the extra mile to create a positive classroom environment and build strong relationships with us students. Even something as simple as her greeting everyone and making us feel welcome in class made me feel seen and included. She was proficient in her subject matter, and I believe most of us had great confidence in her expertise. However, it was her demeanor that truly motivated us to attend her lectures"*



Teachers' efforts to create a positive and collaborative classroom environment are described as essential for these students. This includes measures such as fostering camaraderie among students and facilitating group work, which is particularly crucial in master's programs where a supportive collaborative environment can enhance the learning experience. Exemplified by this student narrative:

*"I started my master's program and entered an environment focused on camaraderie. Attending classes, being part of a class—both lecturers and students cared. We all wanted to create a social and rewarding learning environment. Having study spaces together in groups was fantastic. It became a safe haven where we could always come to study with classmates. It was about fostering a culture and context that made it easier to meet and study together. For this, I thank NTNU, the department, and fellow students. It contributes to a sense of belonging, being part of something bigger, and greater engagement in the master's program and subjects. Together with the department, fellow students, lecturers, and NTNU, we shape our study experience"*

Based on our findings we understand that students value teachers who are not only academically competent but can also convey their knowledge in an engaging and understandable manner. Teachers who inspire, instill trust, and evoke admiration through their professional and personal qualities motivate students to actively participate and engage in the subject matter, as we can read in this next narrative:

*"...I was seen by a teacher during class. It was part of a subject I dreaded participating in because I didn't feel good enough or had anything valuable to contribute. Throughout the lecture, I tried to be as invisible as possible, as one often does when they don't want to reveal their struggles. The teacher eventually came over to my desk and asked what I found difficult. She took her time, sat down, and genuinely wanted to help. With her guidance, she opened my eyes to this very aspect of the subject that I had previously tried to avoid. I felt an immense sense of accomplishment, and even though others performed much better and achieved finer results, I was incredibly proud of what I had accomplished. This experience of mastery and being seen is something I still carry with me, 8 months later"*

From this narrative we understand that the willingness of teachers to go the extra mile in providing individual guidance and support for students' career and academic goals underscores their role as mentors. This includes assistance with everything from career guidance, which can significantly influence students' choices and future paths. As this student wrote: *"...when I encountered highly dedicated teachers during my exchange in Barcelona. This experience led me to reconsider my decision to quit my studies and instead continue"*

Teachers who are open to students' ideas and provide them space to explore and develop these ideas contribute to a culture where innovation and creative thinking thrive. This strengthens students' motivation and engagement in their studies, as can be seen in the following narrative:

*"...Something that has meant a lot to me during my studies is mentors who make an additional effort to meet you with that little something extra. As a student, there are many choices and paths one can take, and I chose my master's direction partly because of the fantastic department I knew I could be a part of.*

*I had encountered narrow-minded attitudes and little willingness to think outside the box or facilitate further development during my bachelor's degree. However, when I connected with the department associated with the master's program I am currently pursuing, my entire perspective on academia shifted. I was met with enthusiasm and interest for my ideas as a student, along with suggestions on how I could further develop these ideas. There has always been an open-door policy to both teachers and mentors, who enthusiastically assisted with everything from dreams of studying abroad to writing ideas and job interview preparations, even before I officially belonged to the department. My department and their enthusiasm for students' thoughts have made my final years as a student incredibly vibrant and motivating. It's essential to be solution-oriented and recognize opportunities when interacting with students; they are the minds of the future, and their ideas need to flourish, not be restricted. The Department of Interdisciplinary Cultural Studies certainly achieves this, and I commend them for it!"*



The student expresses their appreciation for constructive feedback from both teachers and fellow students. This feedback contributes to giving their work meaning and value, not only for themselves but also for others involved. Furthermore, the student emphasizes the importance of delivering criticism in a constructive manner. This helps them rethink what they can improve and how they can approach things differently, as this narrative is as an example of:

*“...receiving constructive feedback from both teachers and fellow students is essential to me. It makes me feel that what I’ve done has value for myself and perhaps for those who participated alongside me. Of course, it’s always helpful to know what I should do differently, but it should be done in a constructive manner, allowing me to change my mindset about what I can improve and how I can approach things differently.”*

## Discussion

In an era where education is frequently quantified by measurable outcomes, this study highlights the importance of the subtler aspects of the learning environment, especially the role of teachers in shaping not only academic results but also the social and personal development of students. Through the narratives of the students themselves, the study reveals how teachers' interactions and pedagogical methods can influence student engagement and well-being. In the following discussion, we will explore these factors based on the theories of both Randall Collins [11] and Carl Rogers [12]. Collins describes how successful social rituals create joy and community, while Rogers emphasizes a person-centered approach that fosters individual growth. Additionally, the discussion will address the implications of this for future teaching practices with the goal of enhancing student over all well-being and engagement.

The students' narratives highlight how the teachers' social skills and personal engagement not only enrich the academic environment, but also play a crucial role in building relational bonds with and among the students. This is in line with Collins [11] who shows how social rituals, in this case in a teaching situation, can create a type of emotional energy that is crucial for strengthening cohesion and motivation among students. Through facilitating student collaboration, and by being actively engaged in their interaction with the students, the teacher contributes to creating an emotional energy in the group that creates positive feelings. This contributes to a learning experience where the students feel valued and engaged, which strengthens their connection both to the subject matter and to each other.

Teachers who show genuine interest in students, and who go beyond the strictly academic to support students' career paths and personal ambitions, act as catalysts for self-realization. This is in line with Rogers' [12] perspective that educational institutions should offer adaptable and supportive learning environments, where the teacher's role as a facilitator is central. Such environments encourage self-reflection and personal growth and are essential for students' development. The findings also underline how teachers' ability to create an open and trusting atmosphere, through actions like personal greetings and strategic measures like facilitating group work, promotes a culture of understanding and cooperation. This is in accordance with Collins' emphasis on joint activity and Rogers' emphasis on relational, supportive learning environments.

This insight into stories told by students has given us a glimpse into how important the relationship between teacher and student can be for their well-being and engagement. Positive interactions, where students feel heard, respected, and valued, can foster a supportive learning environment. This, in turn, can boost students' motivation, engagement in their studies, and overall well-being. The results from this study align with those from prior research, which highlight the significant role of teachers in fostering student well-being [7, 9, 10].

## Conclusion

This study emphasizes the significant role of university teachers, not only in shaping students' academic outcomes, but also in their social and personal development. The ability of teachers to facilitate social engagement and promote personal attachment suggests that pedagogical practice can and should extend beyond the strictly academic. Our findings suggest the potential benefits of an engaging and personalized learning environment. Such an environment could potentially improve students' well-being and engagement as these two aspects appear to be interconnected - students



who are doing well tend to be more engaged, and vice versa [8]. Therefore, by focusing on improving well-being, we might also see an increase in student engagement. Essentially, our findings suggest that successful teaching methods should aim not only to impart knowledge but also to promote a healthy, engaging, and supportive learning environment. However, these are preliminary insights, and further research is needed to substantiate these indications.

This small-scale study has uncovered some important findings that merit further exploration. A more profound understanding of the lecturer's role could contribute to the creation of a more inclusive, supportive, and positive learning environment. This environment could promote well-being and development at both the individual and group level, and possibly strengthen students' connection to both the subject matter and each other. This is an area we will explore further in our upcoming study.

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