
Practice-Oriented Paper

Strengthening Resilience in Japanese Tertiary Education through Student-Teacher Bonds

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The importance of solid student-teacher relationships is widely recognized as essential for academic success in education. This is particularly evident in the Japanese educational system, where these interactions are integral to “sensei culture”¹ and serve a vital role in shaping the educational experience. Students exhibit increased confidence in exploring new topics and embracing academic difficulties when they cultivate strong connections with their professors. The transition from secondary to higher education, a pivotal time in students’ life, is facilitated by help from educators. Understanding the concept of modality entails how students in tertiary education learn. In Japan, the modalities range from face-to-face learning to online classes, which affect how students’ transition from the former to the latter, calling for promoting student-teacher bonds. Theoretical foundations of the learner-teacher relationship are rooted in the interpersonal connection and support within the learning and development context. Prominent theories include attachment theory (Fearon & Roisman, 2017), which posits that a strong and positive learner-teacher relationship provides a solid foundation for students to engage with new challenges during their transition to a new learning environment. Social Learning Theory highlights the significance of observational learning and social interactions in influencing students’ behavior and learning (Woolfolk et al., 2008). Student-teacher relationships are essential in transitions in tertiary education because they are a critical aspect of academic success, as evidenced by an extensive body of research grounded in attachment, social learning, and self-determination theory.

The Concept of “Modality” in Tertiary Education

In tertiary education, the concept of “modality” refers to the different ways through which information is exchanged or presented. Modality acknowledges that individuals possess varying strengths and preferences in learning, leading them to interact with information through diverse modes to improve comprehension and retention of content (Verde & Valero, 2021). Modalities consist of verbal (spoken or written language), visual (diagrams and graphs), kinaesthetic (physical actions and hands-on experiences), interactive (group activities and discussions), and auditory (lectures and sounds).

In the Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) and Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) domains, the modality has a great impact on learning and broader academic contexts as it determines how the learners gain, keep, and apply knowledge.

Today, especially in the wake of the recent pandemic, the prevalence of non-face-to-face teaching models has increased in tertiary education, enabling institutions to offer distance-based degrees and master’s programs (Ali, 2020). Consequently, teachers have been compelled to adapt their teaching techniques to accommodate various modalities.

The Visual, Auditory, and Kinesthetics (VAK) model, as described by Hardiana and Suyata (2018), emphasizes learning through three modalities. Instructional strategies have evolved to encompass various traditional, interactive, and online methods, reflecting the complex requirements of contemporary education. Figure 1 illustrates these instructional modalities, inspired by the VAK model. The diagram incorporates traditional verbal methods (e.g., lectures and discussions), visual techniques (e.g., graphs and multimedia), auditory strategies (e.g., podcasts and audio recordings), kinesthetic approaches (e.g., laboratory or fieldwork), interactive learning emphasizing collaboration, and online learning supported by digital platforms. These modalities constitute a contemporary educational framework that synthesizes various learning preferences with advancements in digital classroom methodologies.

The concept of educational modality extends beyond geographical boundaries, incorporating diverse delivery methods for academic programs

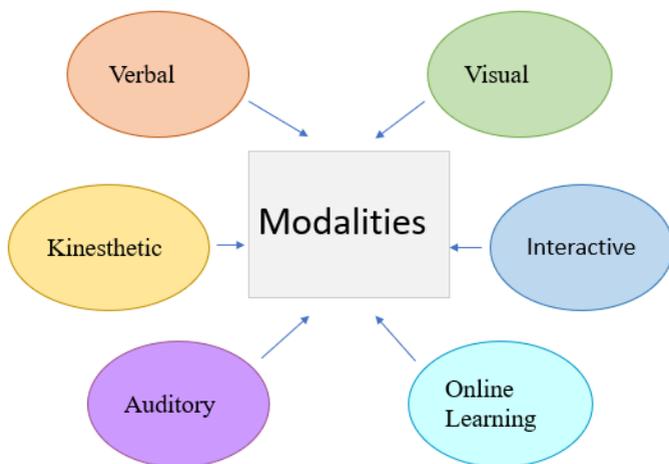


Figure 1. Current instructional modalities in tertiary education inspired by the VAK model.

worldwide. The Japanese tertiary education system exemplifies modalities through traditional in-person classes, online learning platforms, and blended approaches that integrate both of those methods. Although these methods are widely used worldwide, in Japan, the effectiveness of each modality is significantly affected by the quality of student-teacher relationships. The cultivation of these relationships is essential for facilitating a seamless transition from high school to university, irrespective of the selected modality. A comprehensive understanding of transitional dynamics and strategies for fostering strong student-teacher relationships is essential.

Understanding Transition and the Impact on Students

The concept of educational modality exceeds geographical limits, including many means to provide academic programs globally. The Japanese tertiary education system demonstrates modalities via conventional in-person courses, online learning platforms, and blended systems that integrate both methods. Although these strategies are widely used worldwide, in Japan, the efficacy of each modality

is significantly affected by the quality of student-teacher connections. Regardless of the chosen modality, the nurturing of these relationships is crucial for a smooth transition within the educational phases. Therefore, a deep understanding of transitional dynamics and strategies for cultivating robust student-teacher bonds is important.

The education journey requires that students shift from one academic level, educational institution, and environment, which can be challenging for them and affect their learning experiences. Liu and Zhang (2023) defined transition as the process by which a student moves from the structured learning environment of high school to the more independent and diverse realm of higher education. The transition significantly affects students academically, necessitating their adaptation to a new environment, different teaching methods, heightened responsibilities, and increased autonomy.

The transition affects students' socio-emotionally, necessitating the formation of new connections and potentially leading to alterations in their confidence and self-esteem due to the unfamiliar environment. Understanding the effects of transitions is crucial for creating a supportive environment that facilitates successful adaptation for students.

The Japanese tertiary education system includes various transitions and modalities. The shift from high school to university is largely contingent upon test scores and academic performance, enabling students to apply to their favored universities (Yamanaka & Suzuki, 2020). A significant transition takes place at the graduate level, as students' progress into master's and doctoral programs. Research institutes and private sector institutions frequently offer avenues for students to engage in advanced studies in fields such as science, technology, and engineering through private tertiary education (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2018). The Japanese tertiary education system also facilitates international transitions, allowing students from abroad to pursue higher education opportunities in Japan and involving interactions between them and Japanese students, faculty, and staff.

Students transitioning to new environments may face various psychological, social, emotional, academic, and interpersonal challenges. Their psychological

challenges could involve concerns, fears, and anxiety associated with the unknown during their adjustment to a new educational phase. These challenges become even more pronounced when students need to adapt to diverse or multicultural settings, where traits such as cultural empathy, flexibility, and emotional stability are essential for successful adjustment (Van der Zee & Van Oudenhoven, 2000). The students may also require trained counselors to offer them guidance and coping strategies throughout the process.

In addition, social challenges may include forming connections or seeking peer support, which can fluctuate during transitions (Packer & Thomas, 2021). Academic challenges frequently entail the availability of resources and support systems that assist students in navigating the requirements of their new academic settings. Emotional challenges focus on the need for a secure environment to articulate feelings and engage in discussions free from the fear of judgment. Interpersonal challenges may involve managing conflicts and disagreements in a new environment, underscoring the necessity of cultivating conflict resolution skills. Therefore, during the transition phase, the learners may have different needs that require holistic approaches to resolve or meet them (Table 1).

Table 1
Summary of Student Needs During Tertiary Education Transition

Possible Change	Potential Consequences
Psychological	Fear and anxiety
Social	Isolation and feelings of not belonging
Emotional	Feeling insecure
Academic	A new learning environment brings confusion, and stress due to expectations and disappointment
Interpersonal	Conflicts and misunderstandings with others

Theoretical Foundations of Student-Teacher Relationships

Attachment theory, social learning theory, and self-determination theory are some of the theoretical foundations supporting the importance of student-teacher relationships in Japanese education. Attachment theory suggests that a strong bond between the learner and the teacher is a foundation for students' psychological well-being and later relationships. The teacher can provide the learners with emotional support and a safe environment for learning and help them achieve a sense of belonging during their tertiary transition (Spilt & Koomen, 2022). Social learning theory suggests that a strong student-teacher relationship can facilitate positive behavioral modeling among the students. According to Cilliers (2021), new behaviors can be easily gained through imitation and observation. The teacher can become the role model for their students through promoting respectful communication and genuinely showing care to them, which will model their behaviors as they interact with other authoritative figures and their peers. Self-determination theory emphasizes intrinsic motivation, facilitating students' competence and autonomy in decision-making (Morris, 2022). When students perceive their teachers as caring and supportive during their transition, it enhances their sense of belonging and competence. They become encouraged and motivated to work hard in their new learning environment, which positively affects their academic achievement. Therefore, these theories reveal that when the bond between the student and their teachers is strong, tertiary education transition becomes swift and easy.

Supporting student-teacher relationships

Several literary sources underscore the significance of student-teacher relationships in the transition to higher education. Yoshimoto et al. (2023) conducted a thorough literature review indicating that the Japanese education system prioritizes harmony, granting teachers the authority to influence the learning environment. This dynamic serves as a motivator for students, leading to academic excellence. The findings suggest that a positive teacher-student bond in Japan is marked by constructive feedback and emotional support, which nurtures

a positive learning environment. Such relationships not only enhance students' academic performance but also create a sense of trust and belonging that eases their transition into new academic settings.

In addition to teacher-student dynamics, emotional intelligence (also known as emotional quotient, EQ) plays a critical role in fostering successful educational transitions. Parker et al. (2004) highlighted how EQ facilitates the development of positive relationships, particularly during the transition from high school to university. Teachers with high EQ can better manage their own emotions and respond empathetically to students' needs, creating an environment where students feel secure and valued. Parker et al.'s work emphasizes the importance of EQ in strengthening teacher-student bonds, which significantly contributes to students' motivation, emotional well-being, and academic success.

As illustrated in Figure 2, the formation of positive teacher-student bonds is influenced by key factors such as easy transitions, emotional support, and a great sense of belonging. These factors generate outcomes including improved trust, heightened motivation, and the capacity to give and receive constructive feedback. The arrows in the figure illustrate the flow of influence: factors on

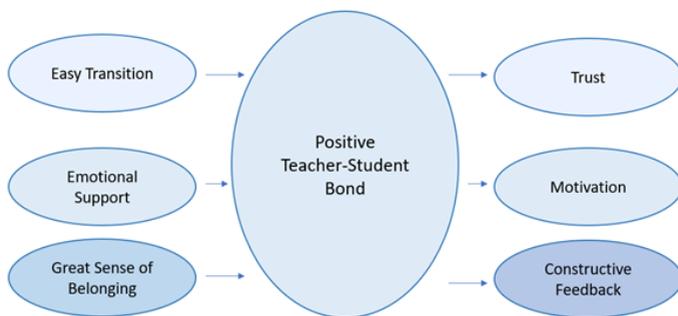


Figure 2. Factors contributing to and outcomes of positive teacher-student bonds.

the left contribute to the formation of teacher-student bonds (center), which subsequently lead to positive outcomes on the right. This visual illustrates the interdependence of these elements and emphasizes their importance in developing a supportive and motivating educational environment.

Integrating harmony, emotional support, and emotional intelligence into teaching practices enables educators to facilitate student success during transitional periods. These elements assist students in overcoming academic challenges while promoting a safe, inclusive, and motivating learning environment.

Strategies for Cultivating Positive Student-Teacher Relationships

A positive and efficient learning atmosphere is created when educators cultivate robust, supporting connections with pupils. Studies demonstrate that students have increased comfort and engagement in their learning when educators exhibit warmth, compassion, and support (e.g., Commissioner for Children and Young People, 2018). Moreover, constructive teacher-student connections facilitate educators in more successfully tackling both academic and behavioral issues (Epstein et al., 2008; Marzano et al., 2003; Goss et al., 2017). These techniques improve communication and illustrate the teacher's dedication to student achievement, fostering a collaborative and supportive classroom environment.

By showing empathy, teachers can demonstrate a genuine interest in their students' lives both inside and outside the classroom. This provides an opportunity for teachers to pay close attention to the challenges and needs of their students and empathize with them in various ways. At Okayama University Medical School, empathy between teachers and students was initially enhanced through a research project on mandatory multimodal comprehensive communication training known as "humanitude" (Fukuyasu et al., 2021). The university included humanitude as part of its curriculum, requiring students to participate in this research initiative. The initial training improved empathy among students and teachers; however, the effects diminished over time, indicating the necessity for continuous reinforcement to sustain empathy in

educational and professional contexts.

Conclusion

In conclusion, a strong relationship between students and instructor is essential throughout the transition to higher education, since it fosters academic achievement, substantiated by research rooted in attachment, social learning, and self-determination theories. The modality concept recognizes the various preferences in learning and the strengths held by each student. Transitioning to tertiary education means the learners are moving from their structured learning environment to a more independent one. In Japan, students transition from high school to university, to private and public institutions, and from face-to-face to online learning. The theories are essential because they prove that student-teacher relationships can promote effective learning and transition to tertiary education. Student-teacher relationships can be cultivated through communication, showing empathy, and understanding the needs of the students.

Notes

1. “Sensei culture” embodies the profound reverence for educators in Japan, extending the term “sensei” beyond the classroom to honor all professionals with significant expertise. This culture, rooted in Confucian values, regards educators as moral and intellectual guides. It promotes relationships that extend beyond academic instruction to encompass mentorship and personal development, thereby influencing Japan’s societal and educational ethos.

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