

How is Teachers' Relational Competence Manifested in Online Higher Education Contexts?

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Abstract

Research shows that the teacher-student relationship is a critical factor in students' learning and development in both traditional and online classrooms. However, research on teachers' relational competence in online higher education contexts is scarce. The present exploratory study aims to identify manifestations of teachers' relational competence in such contexts, focusing on teaching in ongoing interactions. Data were collected from three online seminars conducted during year two of special-education teacher training through a university in Sweden; approximately eight hours of video-recorded material was collected. The findings indicate that the teachers' relational competence is manifested in practice along five main themes: open-ended questions, respectful responses, personal connection, social framing, and humor. We propose that these five themes are important to acknowledge regarding teacher-student relationships in online teaching in higher education. On a more comprehensive level, the article suggests that teachers' relational competence is an important feature in this educational context also. The results are discussed in light of previous research. Overall, the study contributes by outlining how teachers' relational competence is manifested in ongoing interactions in pedagogical practice online. Implications for practice and further research are then discussed.

Keywords: teacher-student relationships, teachers' relational competence, online-teaching, higher education, teacher education

1. Introduction

1.1 *The Aim of the Study*

For universities around the world, the Covid 19 pandemic has led to reorganization of teaching, from traditional in-person classes to online classes (Vega Matuszczyk et al., 2020). At present almost all university programs in Sweden include online courses, and most students have been exposed to them. Anyone who has taught online knows that the conditions for relationship building differ in several respects from regular teaching; for example, eye contact is lost, body language is significantly limited, the amount of verbal backing (such as small "hmm" and "mm") is significantly fewer, and opportunities for quick turn-taking and interactions can be hindered by time delay (see e.g. Hebecci et al., 2020; Song et al., 2016). However, research on pedagogical and relational aspects of online and hybrid formats remains limited (Montelongo & Eaton, 2019; Wiklund-Engblom, 2018).

Over the past thirty years, a substantial body of research has been built up showing that high quality teacher-student relationships (TSR) is a crucial element in students' learning and development (Roorda et al., 2017; Sabol & Pianta, 2012). This applies to both traditional and online-teaching (Song et al., 2016). Teachers' capacity for building positive, supportive relationships is a fundamental component of teacher professionalism (Nordenbo et al., 2008), though research on TSR in higher education is also scarce (Hagenauer & Volet, 2014). The present paper focuses on TSR in online-teaching at the university level and on teachers' "relational competence," that is, their enacted position in the relationship with students (Aspelin & Jonsson, 2019; Skibsted & Matthiesen, 2016). Previous research on "digital relational competence" (Wiklund-Engblom, 2018) focuses on teachers' perceptions. The present study aims to explore how teachers' relational competence manifests in their pedagogical practice in an online higher education context.

1.2 *TSR and Teachers' Relational Competence*

Research convincingly demonstrates that high quality TSR is important for students' social and academic development (Ansari et al., 2020; Hughes, 2012; Roorda et al., 2017). Scandinavian research in the field is often

driven by pragmatic purposes and includes discussions on ways teachers can act to enhance positive relationships and how they can develop relational competence (Aspelin et al., 2021; Aspelin & Jonsson, 2019; Gidlund, 2020; Skibsted & Matthiesen, 2016; Klinge, 2016). In a study of teachers' relational competence in school, Klinge (2016) observes that while there is substantial research establishing that TSR is important and indicating which aspects of TSR matter, strikingly few studies discuss how TSR is built in pedagogical practice.

In an interview study, Wiklund-Engblom (2018) analyzes nine teachers' descriptions of their distance teaching and how it enables them to meet their students' different needs. The teachers attempting to create positive learning environments by, for example, presenting clear teaching structures and offering opportunities for feedback. Wiklund-Engblom (2018) is specifically interested in teachers' "digital relational competence," defined as the degree of sensitivity and responsiveness of their actions during teaching. She concludes that the intensity of the emphasis on achievement in online classrooms causes anxiety for some students, and that, accordingly, designing for psychological safety is an important part of digital relational competence.

Song et al. (2016) emphasize specific conditions for nonverbal communication in online teaching, arguing that "immediacy," in the sense of "verbal and nonverbal communication behaviours reducing social and psychological distance between people" (p. 436) is an essential component of TSR. However, teachers' eye contact, smiling, body position, and the like play relatively limited roles in online teaching. Other tools and techniques come into play. For example, "self-disclosure," that is, "the act of revealing personal information to other people" (p. 437), stands out as particularly important for TSR in this context. Ultimately, Song et al.'s (2016) findings indicate that personalized teaching promotes TSR in online environments.

In one of few review articles in the field, Hagenauer and Volet (2014) present factors characterizing research on TSR in higher education. According to them, the research is divided into two main dimensions. First, studies on the affective dimension examine the value university teachers place on caring relationships in education. Although there is a general notion that university students should be highly independent, caring is an important value in this context. Second, studies on the supportive dimension discuss limits to closeness and informality in TSR. According to many studies, respect, trust, openness, and similar qualities are considered essential values in higher education. However, balance is expected, and too much closeness and informality are considered inappropriate. Having a relatively small number of direct interpersonal contacts is a major obstacle in TSR. TSR though is not only a matter of the quantity of interactions alone but also, and even especially, a matter of quality. Hagenauer and Volet (2014) argue that research on TSR seldom discusses the quality of the relationships.

Tormey (2021) adopts the model designed by Jenking and Oatley (Oatley, 2004) for conceptualizing TSR in higher education across three dimensions: affiliation, affiliating oneself with another through warm, friendly, positive, and reassuring behavior; assertion, enacting inspiring and impressive behavior; and attachment, building attachments through trustworthy and well-intentioned behavior. Tormey's questionnaire incorporates the three dimensions as analytical tools. After administering it to 857 university students, he finds that how students rate the emotional aspect of TSR, where all three dimensions are essential, is an excellent predictor of how they evaluate their education.

In (Segerby, 2022), a university mathematics teacher's digital relational competence is in focus. A 3-hour online seminar with ten pre-service special educators in mathematics in Sweden was video recorded. The teacher's verbal and non-verbal language was examined using the socio-semiotic theory Systemic Functional Linguistics. Findings show that qualities such as the teacher's choice of questions, facial expressions and gestures influence the building of TSR in this educational context.

In Jensen et al.'s (2020) study, 15 university teachers from six Swedish universities participated. The study focuses on the teachers' perceptions of teaching and differences between physical campus contexts and online courses. Findings show that there are variations in the teachers' feelings of closeness and anonymity in relation to online students compared to on-campus students. These variations are related to the type of teaching-learning activities that the teachers prioritize. Teachers that mainly focus on student-subject interaction, for example, the structure of the course, perceive that students become more anonymous in online teaching. In contrast, teachers that focus on social interaction, such as initiating dialogue, group discussions, and showing engagement, perceive that students become closer in online teaching compared to physical classrooms.

1.3 Theoretical Approach

Research on teachers' relational competence often lacks clear theoretical frameworks (Nordenbo et al., 2008), and research on TSR in higher education is no exception (Hagenauer & Volet, 2014). In our previous research, various relational theories, e.g., Scheff (1990), are applied to conceptualize relational competence (e.g., Aspelin, 2017). In Scheff (1990), the human is a social self who is part of ongoing interaction with the world. Maintaining social

bonds with others is, Scheff posits, the fundamental human motive. Bonds are primarily built in verbal and nonverbal communication in a balance between closeness and distance. Based on Scheff's theory and empirical studies on classroom interaction (e.g. Aspelin, 2006), we have constructed a model for conceptualizing the precise meanings in teachers' relational competence. The model has proven useful in intervention studies at the university level (e.g., Aspelin et al., 2021). Our "relational competence model" (RCM) includes the following sub-competences:

- Communicative competence: teachers' skill in achieving high degrees of attunement in verbal and nonverbal communication with students;
- Differentiation competence: teachers' skill in regulating degrees of closeness and distance in their relations with students; and
- Socio-emotional competence: teachers' skills in coping with emotional indicators of ongoing relationships, including their own and students' emotions (Aspelin et al., 2021).

We tentatively apply RCM in the analysis below to identify and present manifestations of university teachers' relational competence in online teaching.

2. Method

From the framework outlined above, relational competence is a situated and interactive phenomenon. In a sense, each case can be considered unique; for example, each individual teacher's relational competence is manifested in particular contexts, situations, interactions, and relationships. However, in this article, we search for patterns that are consistent in the three cases studied.

2.1 Video Documentation

Most research on TSR is quantitative, involving surveys and statistical analysis for identifying factors affecting students' development, learning, and the like (Ewe, 2019; Nordenbo et al., 2008). Qualitative studies, which rely mainly on interviews and observations, are also common (García-Moya et al., 2020; Nielsen & Fibaek Laursen, 2016). Exploring TSR through video documentation is also a common practice (Kleinknecht & Gröschner, 2016; Sabol & Pianta, 2012), and as TSR research is usually based on the notion that relationships are built in interpersonal communication, video is particularly suitable.

Video recordings enable examination not only of verbal language (what is said) but also of nonverbal aspects (how it is said and performed)—such as gesture, gaze, facial expression, and tone of voice (Derry et al., 2010). Nonverbal communication has significant influence on how speakers constitute their talk (Goodwin, 1981) and is of specific importance when investigating interpersonal relationships (Scheff, 1990).

2.2 Sample and Procedure

Data were collected in 2020-2021 from three online seminars conducted through a university in Sweden during year two of the special-education teacher training program, the year students read their specialization. Special education teacher preparation in Sweden comprises 90 ECTS and is a supplementary program for teachers with at least three years of teaching experience. In this study, seminars in three specializations in special education teacher preparation is in focus.

Each seminar involves one of the following specializations: mathematics (coded: MA), developmental disorders (coded: DD), and language, writing, and reading development (coded: LWR). The seminar in mathematics focused on number sense content, and two hours and forty-five minutes of video-recorded material was collected. The teacher is a university lecturer in mathematics didactics, and nine of the eleven seminar students agreed to participate in the study. The seminar in developmental disorders involved aesthetics, and two hours and forty-two minutes of video-recorded material was collected. The teacher is a university lecturer on the subject of art, and twelve of the seventeen seminar students agreed to participate. The seminar in language, writing, and reading development focused on assessment. Two hours and twelve minutes of video-recorded material was collected. The teacher is a senior lecturer in special education, and fourteen of the twenty seminar students agreed to participate.

Before the seminars, all teachers and students were informed both orally and in writing about the purpose of the study. Those electing to participate completed a consent letter. The seminars were conducted via Zoom, and the teachers were visible at all times. Participating students turned on their devices' video cameras. If a teacher shared a PowerPoint presentation, their upper body remained visible in a small box. The students were visible in small boxes throughout the seminars. In this way, all participants were able follow one other's verbal and nonverbal behaviors. Thus, the interaction was clearly visible to the researchers.

2.3 Ethics

Ethical guidelines for the Humanities and Social Sciences set out by the Swedish Research Council (Vetenskapsrådet, 2002) were followed. All subjects were informed of the purpose of the research, that their participation was voluntary, and that they could interrupt their participation at any time. Written consent was obtained from all participants in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki. Students who did not wish to participate did not turn on their cameras and microphones. In accordance with Swedish legislation and institutional requirements, ethical review was not required for the study.

2.4 Analysis

The theoretical framework suggests a design that focuses on teachers' actions and interactions in relation to students in situ, i.e. in authentic teaching processes, and recorded on video. Qualitative thematic analysis is applied to the video recordings, mainly building on the procedure recommended by Braun & Clarke (2006). With thematic analysis, we here aim to identify, analyze, and report patterns of content and meaning in the data. Such procedure is commonly, as in the current case, conducted inductively, so that patterns are distinguished from the empirical material. In this study, both researchers, together and separately, applied qualitative thematic analysis to data in the following seven steps:

- (1) All verbal discourses in the recordings were transcribed verbatim.
- (2) All sequences that include 'exchanges' (Scheff, 1990) between teacher and student, i.e., where one party's action is followed by another party's response, were compiled.
- (3) Patterns related to teacher-student relationships were coded, focusing on sequences where the teachers' actions have visible, and positive impact on the students' responses.
- (4) These codes were assembled into five initial themes for categorizing the data.
- (5) Initial themes were constructed and checked against the coded extracts and the dataset as a whole.
- (6) Each theme was refined, and sub-themes were constructed for two of the five.
- (7) A selection of illustrative extracts was compiled for each theme (all participants names are anonymized).

Thus, we carefully analyzed the video data, focusing on sequences of relevance for TSR. As structured by the five identified themes, the analytical findings are intended to highlight ways in which teachers' relational competence is manifested during the seminars.

3. Results and Analysis

The findings are presented by the five themes and two sub-themes. Excerpts that exemplify the patterns are included under each theme for each seminar (i.e., MA, DD, and LWR).

3.1 Theme 1: Teachers' Relational Competence Manifested through Open-Ended Questions

Multiple examples of teachers asking open-ended questions, questions with no definite answer, are present in the data. In several cases, these questions promote dialogue with students.

Teacher: But it's also about what it means for us as teachers when we try to create conditions. What more can you say about this? Do you want to add something to this line of reasoning?

Student: I was thinking about when the teaching is arranged, then I think we should get more equal democratic rights (...).

Teacher: Mm. Absolutely. What you say is very important, Amy (...). (LWR)

In other cases, the questions invite interpretations of a certain task:

Teacher: Are you watching the screen now? Because, now I will not talk. Now you must read what happens on the screen. What's going on in your brain right now? What are you thinking about? What do you say?

Student: I'm thinking of a monster.

Teacher: You're thinking of a monster. Yes, absolutely, that is one possibility. More suggestions? (DD)

In other cases, teachers probably have an answer in mind but ask open-ended questions to invite students' reflections:

Teacher: We worked on the friends-of-10-exercises, but how about the friends-of-12 or the friends-of-15? What about them? What's your experience?

Student: I guess I have none, but I don't think there is much dividing. It's the friends-of-10. (MA)

The teachers' open-ended questions stimulate dialogue. There are no examples in the data of students exhibiting passivity in the face of such open-ended questions. We thus suggest that teachers' relational competence is manifested in their facility with open-ended questions.

3.2 Theme 2: Teachers' Relational Competence Manifested through Respectful Communication

The teachers respond respectfully to individual student utterances in multiple instances. This occurs after students have completed a turn (sub-theme 1) and during their turns (sub-theme 2).

Sub-Theme 1: Respectful Verbal Response after Students' Turns

In several cases, teachers respond verbally by benevolently interpreting a student's utterance and otherwise showing interest in it:

Student: Because there is so much today that affects this ability, plus or minus, if I may say so.

Teacher: So, somehow the assessment has... The assessment has implications for how the teacher needs to work. Is that what you mean Robin?

Student: Yes, and I think that it has become more difficult and complex (...) (LWR)

Teachers also commonly respond with affirmative expressions such as "exactly" and "absolutely":

Student: You don't really know where the focus is. It fluctuates back and forth [laughs].

Teacher: Yes, exactly. You mix two different pictures and see two different things. What do you see first, Carol?

Student: I probably saw from the front first. The eye catches my eye—with a pretty piercing gaze.

Teacher: Absolutely. And the rest of you, what do you say? What caught your attention first? (DD)

In some cases, the teachers demonstrate that they perceive students' questions as important:

Student: But how do you work to promote this? Because there are students who have difficulties with this.

Teacher: Great. And then it's like this. Here. I've done ... Oh, it's so good that you raised this question, I should have, in the beginning. (MA)

Teachers' respectful verbal responses after students' turns promote TSR and we thus interpret them as manifestations of their relational competence.

Sub-Theme 2: Respectful Verbal and Nonverbal Responses During Student Turns

In several cases, the teachers affirm the students through short responses during their turns. Nonverbal responses are also revealing, and the most commonly observed form is the teacher nodding in accompaniment to a student's talk:

Student: Perhaps it's more common when you're a bit older, to consider how others think and feel.

Teacher: [Looks down at the desk and takes notes. Nods several times when the student speaks]. I think many of us share your experience, Anna.

Student: I think it's more difficult and more complex to assess questions [the teacher nods] in the earlier system [the teacher nods several times]. (LWR)

Teachers' nonverbal responses are also commonly accompanied by verbal responses.

Student: Yes, it's easier when you have children of the same age. [The teacher nods several times.] Like I have right now. [The teacher nods and says, "Yes."] That's easier [the teacher nods several times]. (DD)

In some cases, a teacher's nods are accompanied by other nonverbal responses.

Teacher: What do we carry with us when it comes to number sense? What do you say?

Student: We have quite a lot on numbers, at least up to ten, I think [teacher nods] that we have counted on. One cup, one mother [teacher nods], and so on. Quite normal [teacher nods, moves her hand up and down, following the student's speech] when you have small children.

Teacher: Exactly. [Repeats the same up and down hand movement.] (MA)

Teachers' brief, respectful, nonverbal and verbal responses when the students have the turn promote TSR; thus, we interpret this as manifestations of their relational competence.

3.3 Theme 3: Teachers' Relational Competence Manifested through Personal Connections

There are frequent examples of teachers aiming to establish personal connections with students. In two of the contexts, the teachers often call students by name (sub-theme 1), and in all three contexts teachers draw parallels between the teaching and their personal experiences (sub-theme 2).

Sub-Theme 1: Addressing Students by Name

On many occasions the teachers address the students by name when they solicit commentary:

Teacher: Yes, you don't need to be really good at art. However, you do need to be pedagogically competent. That's the main point here. But the more experience you gain, the easier it is to come up with ideas. So, I think you are all sitting here with a bank of experiences that we can examine and use as a basis for discussion. Kim?

Student: Yes, I've got a pupil who draws a lot and loves music, often new artists that I don't like at all. (DD)

Teachers also address the students by name while giving feedback:

Student: Well, if you consider that our society assumes that everyone can read and write, but when education fails to provide this, that's going to affect the direction taken by our society.

Teacher: Mm. Absolutely. What you're saying is incredibly important, Alex. Because it's really like that. And that's also the whole purpose of what is written in the introductory part of the curriculum, about being an active, democratic citizen and taking part. (LWR)

The teachers address the students by name, both when they invite them to contribute and when they respond to their utterances. Addressing students by name rather than by some other means is more personal, and, we suggest, is a manifestation of their relational competence.

Sub-Theme 2: Self-Disclosure

On several occasions, teachers share personal information, often through comparisons with lesson content and events from their everyday lives:

Teacher: Right now, I'm in the process of moving. And we've been in a period of ... well, you know, we've switched insurance companies, we've changed banks. We've made a lot of such changes. We've gone through our telephone contracts. Yeah, you can imagine all these things you have to do and change. I think that almost every day I've got some kind of mail, asking me for some kind of feedback. (...) Everything has to be measured and evaluated. So, I find this interesting as a comparison to school. (LWR)

The teachers also connect lesson content to their experiences in school:

Teacher: I was given the task of implementing the compulsory assessment support at all primary schools. It was actually here that we discovered this issue with the counting rhyme and that our pupils weren't able to do it to the extent we thought they could. (MA)

One of the teachers points out her lack of experience in the specific educational context:

Teacher: What does the term [aesthetics] mean to you? And what do you need? Because I'm no expert in your field, namely special education. I'm actually ... well, in the beginning I trained to be a high school teacher, teenagers from 16 to 19. As a matter of fact, I'm an artist, so I see things from a different angle than you do. (DD)

All three teachers share personal information with a connection to the seminar content, which, according to earlier research, promotes TSR. Accordingly, we propose that sharing personal information is another manifestation of teachers' relational competence.

3.4 Theme 4: Teachers' Relational Competence Manifested through Social Framing

The teachers talk frankly with the students about the seminars' social framing. One teacher advocates for the students' cameras being on, arguing that it increases interaction:

Teacher: I go on a bit here at the start saying that it's good if you have both picture and sound switched on, because it's a seminar we're holding together, not a lecture. And I would like to be able to see you when I talk, and you can imagine how dull it would be if it was just me just here, and you were sitting there, staring at a blank screen. That's not a fun meeting. So, I would really like to see you. (DD)

Another teacher talks about the importance of non-verbal language for social cohesion:

Teacher: But I'd like to start by having everyone say Hi to each other, and so those who feel comfortable being on screen can switch their cameras on now. I always think that it feels good to see each other's faces, as far as that's possible working like this, via video link. (...) I think we should give a little wave to one another, so we at least get the feeling that we have said "hi" to each other and that we are in the same room [teacher and students smile] (LWR)

All the teachers encourage students to take the initiative, and two of them mention the chat function as an alternative means of asking questions:

Teacher: Just like Lina said, I've no problem with being interrupted. So if you have something to add or ask, or if you want to go through something one more time, wave your hand, or just say it out loud. Because I can see that a lot of you have your microphones on anyway, and if you don't want to have them on all the time just speak up. There might be some of you who are thinking "no, it's not really the right time to say this." If you feel like that, do as Robin just said, and write your comment in the chat bubble. I'll check through the chat comments during the break and deal with any questions afterwards (MA).

One teacher also highlights the use of non-verbal language during feedback:

Teacher: So then, give some extra nods so that we get a feeling of interaction with each other. And if there's something you need to say "I disagree" to, you can of course shake your head or something. So basically, this is about feedback. (LWR)

One teacher expresses some reservations about non-verbal communication:

Teacher: And as I said, I'd prefer you to say "yes" instead of seeing a thumbs-up, because I can't see that when I'm showing you a load of pictures later. So, feel free to comment out loud. That's the kind of working environment we're striving for in our subject, art (DD).

Teachers directly discuss social framing in the seminars, including the use of cameras and microphones and procedures for questions and feedback. Such discussions explicitly address the safety of the group with the group, and thus we interpret them as manifestations of teachers' relational competence.

3.5 Theme 5: Teachers' Relational Competence Manifested through Humor

Teachers frequently turn to humor in creating a positive atmosphere, and they also laugh to support the students' laughter:

Teacher: So ZPD, Vygotsky, and dynamic assessment [the teacher looks at the Power Point template she is filling in]. Did you say something more, Emma? [The teacher looks up at the student.]

Student: [Draws out the words for a few seconds.] Not really [laughs, with mouth closed].

Teacher: [Laughs with mouth open.]

Student: [Laughs with mouth open.]

Teacher: Thanks. (LWR)

In another example, the teacher asks a humorous question, which is followed by the students' laughter—and the teacher's:

Teacher: Yeah, I see that there are bikes in all the pictures. But listen, hand on heart, could you actually cycle on those bikes that you've drawn?

Student: No [laughter].

Students (Together): No [laughter].

Teacher: [Laughter]. No, or yes, maybe someone has fixed it. Are those pedals loose? Is there a chain connected, and what's going on with the handlebars? And, hmm.

Student: You're so fussy [laughter].

Teacher: [Laughter]. Is that all necessary? What is it that actually makes a bike a bike?

Student: [Laughter.] (DD)

On another occasion, a teacher encourages a student to further study and creates a relaxed interaction by laughing:

Teacher: So, they know exactly what you mean. That's very interesting [little smile].

Student: Yeah, yeah [smile].

Teacher: You could almost do a study of it and give it some more thought [the student smiles with mouth open].

Teacher: Yes, maybe [loud laugh].

Student: I'll have to graduate here first.

Teacher: Yes, of course [loud laughter continues]. Yeah, exciting, isn't it? [Laughter trails off.]

Student: Yes [smiles with mouth open].

The teachers' use of humor facilitates interaction, by, for example, defusing embarrassing situations as here, and we thus interpret it as another manifestation of strong relational competence.

4. Discussion

4.1 Summary

The findings indicate that the following practices (the five main themes) are manifestations of teachers' relational competence:

- (1) open-ended questions: asking questions that invite dialogue and show interest in students' ideas and experiences;
- (2) respectful communication: using verbal and nonverbal responses to convey respect for students, both during and after their turns;
- (3) personal connection: addressing students by name and relating topics of study to teachers' own experiences;
- (4) social framing: offering explicit reasoning on how the seminars should be framed and thereby facilitate relationship building; and
- (5) humor: lightening the atmosphere through humor, especially laughter.

4.2 Contribution

Previous research leaves little doubt that TSR is essential for students' learning and development and that relational competence is a central component of teacher professionalism. However, such research mainly concerns traditional school teaching in schools. As the present study indicates, relational competence is important also in online teaching in higher education.

Wiklund-Engblom's (2018) study on online teaching, suggests that teachers aim to encourage a clear order of interactions and to create opportunities for feedback. The present study focuses on teachers' relational practice, revealing that direct discussion of social framing is another common feature in this context. Wiklund-Engblom finds that online students can feel exposed through the emphasis on evaluation in online courses and urges teachers to design for psychological safety. A consistent feature identified above is teachers aiming for respectful communication. What Wiklund-Engblom labels "digital relational competence" is indeed also relevant here.

Song et al. (2016) state that TSR quality presupposes social and psychological closeness, which is complicated online. One theme here, the teachers' ambition to create personal connections, is effected in calling students by name and relating their own experiences. Teachers' self-disclosure (Song et al., 2016) occurs to some degree in the material by the teacher, for example calling the student by name but also when the teacher refers to her own experience. That teachers' references to their own experiences can promote relationships with students is evident also in Segerby's (2022) study of online teaching. Moreover, the importance of nonverbal communication for immediacy is pronounced; the teachers' nonverbal responses during and after student turns appear crucial for TSR in this context (also).

Hagenauer and Volets' (2014) review on TSR in higher education describes specific challenges teachers face in this context. For example, teachers are expected to practice a caring approach but without interfering in students' independence. The five themes identified here reflect teachers' actions toward promoting positive and supportive online learning environments. The teachers observed here appear to view caring as a key quality of their relational competence. Hagenauer and Volet (2014) moreover show that higher education usually presupposes balance between teachers' support and challenges as well as clear boundaries for closeness and informality. Online teaching involves relatively high degrees of distance and formalization, and opportunities for teachers to support students as individuals are comparatively fewer than in traditional university environments. Nonetheless, the participating teachers seem to aim for communicative climates where closeness is valued, as is evident in the themes of personal connection and respectful communication. Closeness in relationships is an important quality

also in Jensen et al.'s (2020) study, where the teachers that prioritized social interactions with students in their online teaching perceived a higher degree of closeness in the online context compared to face-to-face meetings with the students.

The present themes connect naturally with Tormey's (2021) three-dimensional model for conceptualization of TSR. The "respectful communication," "personal connection," and "humor" themes connect with the affiliation dimension. The "open-ended questions" and "social framing" themes connect with the attachment dimension. Finally, "personal connection" connects with the assertion dimension. Overall, these findings are in line with Tormey's statement that teacher's positive and respectful manner is an essential component of TSR in higher education.

The present paper thus confirms previous research in various respects, but also contributes to other respects, mainly by outlining how teachers' relational competence is manifested in ongoing interaction in pedagogical practice.

4.3 RCM-Based Conceptualization

As noted above, RCM includes three sub-competences, communicative competence, differentiation competence, and socioemotional competence (Aspelin et al., 2021). The model has been developed in studies on traditional teaching, and the present findings suggest that the sub-competences are also relevant to online teaching as follows:

- Use of open-ended questions reflects communicative competence: teachers aim for verbal communication promoting mutual understanding.
- Respectful communication is another indicator of communicative competence: in interaction, including nonverbal responses, teachers show appreciation for students' social value.
- Personal connection suggests differentiation competence: teachers aim for immediacy, for reducing the "space" between themselves and the students in a teaching situation characterized by distance.
- Social framing is another indicator of communicative competence: teachers aim for social frameworks that promote mutual understanding and respect in relation to and among students.
- Use of humor suggests socio-emotional competence: teachers use various means to create a positive atmosphere, including by managing students' embarrassment.

Applying RCM in this way confirms the impression that relational competence is an important feature in the online classroom in higher education. Specifically, how a teacher communicates through mannerisms emerges as important in this context also.

4.4 Limitations

The conclusions presented are tentative and the study is limited to three classroom settings. Certainly, we cannot extend our claim that the identified themes are central in online-teaching in general. More research is needed before we can properly comment on the relevance of these findings.

The authors of this paper are both university professors with long histories of online teaching. We have developed other ideas about various kinds of micro-practices that may promote online TSR, which are not presented here. We do not seek to present a comprehensive picture of teachers' online relational competence but rather to conceptualize the practices that characterize the empirical material.

4.5 Implications for Practice

The need for research on TSR in the digital classroom is not only interdisciplinary but also emanates from educational practice. Distance education has become an increasingly important element in higher education programs. The present study outlines how participating university teachers act to promote TSR in their online practice. Teachers' capacity for building quality TSR in traditional classrooms is not always easily transferable to digital classrooms (Song et al., 2016) and the conditions differ in several respects. For example, in digital classrooms teachers and students lack direct eye contact and present limited body language; further, opportunities for quick turn-taking are counteracted by time delays. Such circumstances are negatives for teachers' seeking opportunities for encountering students in a sensitive and responsive manner. Toward overcoming such obstacles, the identified themes may be useful in discussing approaches to developing TSR in this context.

4.6 Implications and Further Research

There is a need for more comprehensive and more penetrating studies on teachers' relational competence in online contexts in higher education. Given a more extensive approach, we would investigate the degree to which the themes delineated above are common in online TSR. We would also discover other practices promoting TSR and differences in TSR among educational contexts. Moreover, we would discover and report in more detail and depth

on teachers' actions that enhance or counteract TSR. We will take the next step in our project along the latter path: an episode representing the identified patterns will be analyzed microscopically, focusing on nonverbal communication. In this way, we hope to contribute to a more profound understanding of teachers' relational competence as manifested in online practice.

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