Teacher—Student Relationships in an Online Graduate Program: A Phenomenological Analysis

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Abstract

Student experiences of closeness in teacher–student relationships can be of profound influence. Better understanding the personal and emotional contexts of such a phenomenon are of critical importance, especially in online and blended learning environments where students and teachers are physically or geographically separated. Such physical distance between teachers and students may diminish or heighten experiences of closeness in this relationship. However, less is known about student experiences of the relational quality of closeness with teachers in distance learning environments. This phenomenological study focused on exploring and reporting on such experiences of closeness. Semi-structured interviews with doctoral students, doctoral candidates, and recent graduates from a fully online graduate program were conducted. A phenomenological analysis was used to shed light on closeness in the postsecondary teacher–student relationships that unfold online. The analysis led to the thematization of four aspects or sets of aspects of closeness in the teacher–student relation: direct teacher–student communication, style or the communication of personality (teacher persona), indirect teacher–student communication, and student self-relation. Through descriptions and researcher commentary on selected accounts and extracts of students' lived experiences, this study details how these four aspects intertwine and contribute to the relational quality of closeness in the teacher–student relation. Further, this study suggests that prolonged exposure to these aspects may provide greater opportunities for closeness to emerge in this relation, but such exposure is not required to experience closeness. Findings and avenues for future research are discussed.

Keywords: Teacher–student relationships, relationships, online, closeness, connectedness, higher education

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Introduction

Teacher–student relationships are integral to the academic experience (Chickering & Gamson, 1987). Researchers have explored teacher–student relationships with adolescents (Ang, 2005; Engels et al., 2016; Hughes et al., 2012; Jia et al., 2017; Muller, 2001; Murray & Malmgren, 2005; Murray & Pianta, 2007; Wang et al., 2013), with adult learners (De Jong et al., 2014; Frymier & Houser, 2000; Jorgenson et al., 2018; Lee et al., 2020), and across multiple fields (i.e., psychology, education, and communication; Hagenauer & Volet, 2014). Research has shown, among other things, that positive teacher–student relationships are a key factor in student success (Arbaugh & Hornik, 2006; Johnson, 2006; Meyer, 2003). Yet, Hagenauer and Volet (2014) contend that too much of the research on postsecondary teacher–student relationships has focused only on student attrition.

Communication and interaction between teachers and students are essential to the teacher–student relationship (Katz, 1968). The frequency and occurrence of teacher–student interactions in postsecondary settings has been widely studied (Hagenauer & Volet, 2014; Lamport, 1993). Research has shown that the frequency of interactions between teachers and students influences, among other things, the quality of the teacher–student relationship (Jacob, 1957; Rogers, 1962) and student learning outcomes (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1978). Yet, less is known about the quality of these interactions, particularly those taking place between teacher and student in postsecondary settings (Hagenauer & Volet, 2014).

Communication between teachers and students can be conceptualized as interactions that occur at either a sociological level of roles (e.g., teacher or student) or a psychological level of individuals that constitutes interpersonal communication (Dobransky & Frymier, 2004; Millar & Rogers, 1976). Interpersonal communication involves relational qualities or factors that influence experiences of the relationship (e.g., control, trust, and intimacy; Millar & Rogers, 1976). Relational qualities such as intimacy are often interpreted differently by researchers, leading to overlapping definitions. Regardless, Dobransky and Frymier (2004) argued that “while the terms immediacy and intimacy have been used differently, they have both essentially been conceptualized as closeness” (p. 213).

Closeness, in turn, has consistently been used in the study of teacher–student relationships in a way that is similar if not interchangeable with connection or connectedness (see Dikkers et al., 2012; Giles et al., 2012; Hattie & Yates, 2013; Jorgenson et al., 2018; Lundy & Drouin, 2016; Townsend & McWhirter, 2005; Trespalacios et al., 2021). Of further significance to the present study is the fact that in their review of the relevant literature, Townsend and McWhirter (2005) found that “most conceptualizations of connectedness included a self-in-relation to others component and a more internally focused self-component” (p. 168). In other words, the student’s experience of connectedness to teachers in the teacher–student relationship concerns both how they relate to their teachers as well as how they relate to themselves. In summarizing the work of Pianta and others, Hattie and Yates (2013) described closeness in teacher–student relationships simply as “…the emotional context of teaching interactions” (p. 17).

Research suggests that students who perceive a sense of connectedness or closeness with teachers are more confident (Ryan et al., 1998), less anxious (Creasey et al., 2009), and perform better academically (Eccles, 2004; Pianta & Stuhlman, 2004). There is also reason to believe that developing such a relational sense is even more important in online doctoral programs, where students, typically enrolled for over five years (NSF, 2019), often rely on their working relationships with their faculty supervisors and dissertation committees for success (see Fuller et al., 2014; Lee et al., 2020).

Literature Review

Research suggests that teacher–student relationships in traditional in-person classroom settings are multidimensional and dynamic (Frymier & Houser, 2000; Giles, 2008; Hagenauer & Volet, 2014; Jorgenson et al., 2018)—multidimensional in that there are many factors that may influence the relationship (e.g., age, parents, teachers, schools, community, and environment). Teacher–student relationships are dynamic in that they are subject to changes over time (Gehlbach et al., 2012), marked by relational turning points (Docan-Morgan & Manusov, 2009), and involve highly contextualized and individualized processes and events (Pianta et al., 2012). The case can be made that such processes and events emerge between teacher and student and are not the result of impersonal factors and techniques that can simply be manipulated at will by the teacher.

Research also suggests that the dynamics of teacher–student relationships in online courses may differ from those developed in face-to-face courses (Song et al., 2016). For instance, teachers and students in online courses interact with multiple communication modes both within and outside the learning management system (e.g., discussion boards, virtual office hours, email). Teacher–student relationships in online programs may also differ from those in a single or one-off online course as students may have greater opportunity to engage, communicate, and interact with teachers in different ways over longer periods of time. Research has also shown, among other things, that graduate student perceptions of connectedness to online programs may vary (Bolliger & Inan, 2012; Green et al., 2017; Irani et al., 2014; Jamison & Bolliger, 2020; Rockinson-Szapkiw et al., 2014; Trespalacios et al., 2021). However, teacher–student relationships in online courses and programs are under-researched; the majority of literature on this relationship focuses on the face-to-face context.

Researchers seek to correlate the development of positive teacher–student relationships in online settings with other factors. These include the intensity and frequency of teacher communication (Green et al., 2017), type of communication (e.g., email or feedback) (LaBarbera, 2013), and delivery method (e.g., asynchronous, synchronous) (Martin et al., 2018). Despite such studies, researchers agree that further research on connectedness in online settings is needed (Green et al., 2017; Irani et al., 2014; LaBarbera, 2013; Martin et al., 2018; Trespalacios et al., 2021).

Untangling highly related constructs such as connectedness, belongingness, and community may be an onerous task when defining terms in research (Trespalacios et al., 2021). Indeed, “previous research suggests that [teacher–student relationships] can be described using a range of concepts including closeness, care, connection, safety, trust, honesty, fairness, respect,

openness, support, encouragement, availability, and approachability" (Hagenauer & Volet, 2014, p. 378). Yet, connectedness, in various definitions and interpretations, appears to presuppose a shared faith between members in relation, often implying mutuality or relational symmetry (Irani et al., 2014; Martin et al., 2018). In contrast, closeness, as conceptualized in the literature, is more individualized and may arise from unique personal experiences and interactions rather than mutual expectations (Clark & Lemay, 2010; D'Alba, 2014; Rempel et al., 1985). This distinction is particularly relevant in teacher–student relationships, which are inherently asymmetrical (Hagenauer & Volet, 2014). In such relationships, closeness may be built not on mutuality but rather on a foundation of predictability and dependability, which can foster trust over time (Rempel et al., 1985). This is even more salient in online teacher–student relationships, where psychological and physical distance may shape relational experiences (Liberman et al., 2007; Moore, 1993; Won et al., 2018), and where a sense of closeness may depend on a student's ability to interpret relational cues across multiple communication modalities (see Bolinger et al., 2024; Cai et al., 2022; Dixson et al., 2017; Richardson & Lowenthal, 2017). Given these distinctions, further research is needed to explore how students experience and interpret closeness in online teacher–student relationships.

Previous research has yet to capture the nuanced complexities of students' lived experiences in sensing closeness to their teachers. Studies on teacher–student relationships suggest that developing positive relational attributes (e.g., a sense of connection) is predicated upon positive emotional experiences (see Arbaugh & Hornik, 2006; Green et al., 2017; Johnson, 2006; LaBarbera, 2013; Martin et al., 2018; Meyer, 2003). Yet, less is known about what constitutes such positive emotions in this relation. The quality of the teacher–student relationship—like any relationship—is lived, involving changing feelings and impressions that are inadequately communicated through scales and other measures. Survey instruments, for example, presuppose the relevance of fixed, a priori constructs (such as positive or negative valuations or satisfaction levels), potentially limiting the range of relational phenomena and variations that may be available for study (see Bolliger & Inan, 2012; Terrell et al., 2009). Through its phenomenological design, this study focused on the experience of relation between teacher and student without unnecessarily framing it as a question of predefined evaluative or correlational categories.

Thus, the teacher–student relationship is a relationship that is simultaneously professional and personal, cognitive and affective in character. It is one that lacks the mutuality, say, of a friendship and is deliberately arranged to come to an end. In these and other ways, the relationship between student and teacher appears different from other relationships in our lives. However, few studies explore this unique combination of qualities in postsecondary teacher–student relationships or in online settings.

Methods

The purpose of this study was to investigate students' lived experiences of teacher–student relationships while completing an online doctoral program. Specifically, the guiding research question of this phenomenological study was: How do doctoral students experience the teacher–student relationship in a fully online doctoral program? A phenomenological research

design was employed to answer this question. This study was approved by an Institutional Review Board (protocol #101-SB21-091), and all participants provided informed consent.

Data Collection

This study was conducted with graduate students enrolled in a fully online Educational Technology doctoral program at a university in the western United States. A mixture of convenience and purposive sampling was used to identify participants. The first author piloted the interview questions with a fellow doctoral student. The pilot interview helped refine the semi-structured interview protocol. The finalized semi-structured interview questions can be found in Appendix A.

The first author invited 29 current students or recent graduates to participate in this study. A total of 11 students were purposely sampled and interviewed. However, extracts from only seven interview transcripts were included in the final report of the findings. The first author felt that these extracts, which include participant vignettes and research commentary, demonstrated "...convergence and divergence, representativeness and variability" (Smith, 2011, as cited in Beck, 2021, p. 124). Table 1 presents demographic characteristics of the seven participants included in the final report.

Table 1

Selected Participant Profiles

Pseudonym	Gen	Race	Age	Emp	Occ	Prog	Courses	Exp
Emerson	M	W	25-34	FT	HE	CW	6	None
Kerri	F	W	35-44	FT	HE	CW	11	1-5 yrs
April	F	W	25-34	FT	HE	CW	8	1-5 yrs
Rory	M	N/A	25-34	FT	K12	CW	9	1-5 yrs
Rylee	N/A	N/A	35-44	FT	HE	Diss	10	1-5 yrs
Leila	F	W	35-44	FT	HE	Diss	15	10+ yrs
Brax	M	W	35-44	FT	HE	Grad	16	5-10 yrs

Note. Gen: Gender, Emp: Employment Status, Occ: Occupation, Prog: Program Status; CW: Coursework, Diss: Dissertating, Grad: Graduated, Exp: Online Teaching Experience, yrs: years

Data Analysis

The first author used NVivo to code, visualize, and query data. Data analysis adopted an iterative, hermeneutic approach, engaging deeply with each participant's account through a fusion of horizons and the hermeneutic circle (Gadamer, 1975). The analysis incorporated analytic memo writing, coding, modeling, and thick description to deepen interpretive engagement with the data.

To begin, the first author read the transcripts multiple times to develop familiarity, followed by in vivo coding to capture significant participant statements in their own words. Next, significant statements were examined for patterns, relational dynamics, and recurring concerns that informed broader meaning-making (Saldaña, 2015). Rather than treating these patterns as fixed themes, the first author maintained an openness to evolving interpretations, resisting premature formalization of categories. Subsequently, subcategories within these patterns were developed manually and refined into broader conceptual groupings (Alsaigh & Coyne, 2021). These groupings—interpreted as abstractions of first-order participant expressions—were shaped through both theoretical insights and reflexive engagement with the data corpus.

Because the first author was also a student in the same program as participants, his positionality functioned as both an interpretive advantage and a reflexive challenge. While his shared academic context allowed for greater sensitivity to the subtleties of relational dynamics in online education, it also required active engagement with the hermeneutic circle to differentiate between shared assumptions and emergent participant meanings. Reflexivity—sustained through analytic memoing—ensured that interpretation remained dynamic rather than a reproduction of prior assumptions, engaging the hermeneutic circle where understanding evolved iteratively through the interplay of the whole and its parts (Friesen et al., 2012; Gadamer, 1975; Gallagher, 1992).

As interpretation progressed, participant accounts were transformed from first-person narratives into third-person descriptions. This shift enabled the first author to move beyond individual descriptions toward an interpretive understanding shaped through a fusion of horizons (Gadamer, 1975). This interpretive process unfolded as an ongoing dialogue between the researcher's preconceptions, emergent participant meanings, and the broader theoretical and historical context of the teacher–student relationship in online education.

Through multiple readings of the data, patterns of relational dynamics began to take shape, leading to the identification of aspects or sets of aspects of closeness as described by participants. Rather than treating these as rigid themes, the analysis sought to preserve their evolving nature within the interpretive dialogue. Statements were not merely counted or categorized but examined for their depth of meaning, revealing interwoven dimensions of communication, presence, and self-relation. Returning to the data at different stages of interpretation helped refine these aspects and ensure coherence in the final synthesis (Friesen et al., 2012; Gadamer, 1975).

Positionality

While multiple authors contributed to this study, the first author was solely responsible for data collection, analysis, and interpretation. Co-authors contributed through methodological consultation, feedback on study design, and revisions to the final manuscript.

At the time of the study, the first author was a 36-year-old cisgender white male, brother, husband, and father—roles that shaped his understanding of relational dynamics and emotional connection in human relationships. His lived experiences—both positive and challenging—within these roles informed his sensitivity to the nuances of teacher–student relationships in

online education. Before the study began, he had extensive experience designing and supporting the design of online courses and had taught both online and in person in postsecondary settings, though he was not teaching at the time of data collection or analysis.

He also espoused a social constructivist pedagogy in his teaching, interpretation, and understanding of the world at the time of the study. As a doctoral candidate in educational technology, he analyzed the qualitative data corpus independently. His insider-outsider position as a student in the same program as participants fluctuated throughout the research process, from conceptualizations to outputs. He considered these positions situationally dependent on contextual shifts in role and relationship (e.g., receiving feedback on the proposal or manuscript from his teachers versus analyzing the qualitative data corpus), yet he acknowledges that a complete dichotomy of positions was never achieved.

Rather than viewing his shared academic background with participants as a limitation, he actively engaged in reflexivity to interrogate the influence of prior assumptions and maintain interpretive openness. This positionality provided a unique lens for meaning-making, allowing for deeper engagement with participants' narratives while requiring careful attention to differentiating between personal familiarity and emergent aspects of relational closeness in the data.

Throughout data collection and analysis, he engaged in analytic memoing and field notes, documenting evolving interpretations and reflexive insights in the tradition of Gadamerian hermeneutic phenomenology (Friesen et al., 2012; Gallagher, 1992). The impetus for this study arose from his own personal and emotional experiences of closeness in the teacher–student relation in the study site, and previous experiences of related closeness in other settings and contexts in his life. He wondered whether his experiences were unique, shared, or arbitrary and sought to better understand how the teacher–student relation unfolds online.

Results

Four aspects or sets of aspects of closeness in the teacher–student relation emerged in this study: direct teacher–student communication, indirect teacher–student communication, student self-relation, and the style or the communication of personality (understood as teacher persona). These aspects were present in all of the participants' descriptions of experiences. These aspects attempt to illustrate the phenomenon of closeness in the teacher–student relationship. The interplay of these aspects is of critical importance as the first author believes that in various combinations, they underlie the subtle and overt, complicated and simple facets of the emotional context of teaching interactions in online settings. Table 2 contains definitions of each of these four aspects and is followed by researcher commentary on selected accounts and extracts of participants' experiences.

Table 2

Aspects of Closeness in the Teacher–Student Relation

Aspect	Definition
Direct teacher–student communication	The relation or atmosphere shared between student and teacher is cultivated through asynchronous or synchronous communication that occurs directly and mutually between the teacher and the student (e.g., feedback on academic work; individual emails) or in group settings (e.g., course announcements or discussion boards). This is one way, perhaps the dominant way, in which relation arises and is experienced.
Indirect teacher–student communication	Communication that discloses aspects of the teacher to the student only indirectly, through myriad aspects of curricular and course design (e.g., teacher instructions and introductions, instructional media), and the habits and tempo (for example) associated with the course as the semester progresses.
Student self-relation	How the student relates to themselves in relation to the teacher. Students see themselves as being (mis)recognized, (under)valued and/or (mis)understood in their relationship with instructors.
Style or the communication of personality (teacher persona)	How the student perceives the instructor's personality or teacher persona that is conveyed and indirectly expressed through all of the forms of communication described above.

Experiences of Closeness and Disconnect

Closeness and disconnect are not inherently oppositional constructs but exist along a continuum of relational experience. Moments of perceived disconnect do not necessarily signal relational absence; rather, they reveal the nuanced emotional contours of teacher–student interactions. These moments may sometimes be best understood as relational ambiguity, where interpretation of connection or distance is fluid and shaped by context. Importantly, both closeness and disconnect emerge from the depth and salience of emotional engagement in teaching interactions—not merely by the presence or absence of positive emotion. In the following section, six vignettes of participant experiences illustrate extended patterns of interaction over time. These accounts—shaped by direct and indirect communication, teacher persona, and students' self-relation—illuminate how the emotional context of teaching interactions manifests dynamically through both closeness and moments of perceived disconnect.

Emerson's Experience

Emerson discussed three instructors, each with a unique style: One focused on building community, another on facilitating small group work, and the third on providing project feedback. He associated instructors' teacher persona with their course design and interaction foci (e.g., discussion forums, feedback, annotation, peer review), noting that "the course design is reflective of the instructor." Emerson appreciated the mentorship, opportunities to co-author

papers, and personal insights and experiences shared by his instructors. He was actively curious about his instructors, seeking to understand their perspectives and approaches, yet found himself drawn more to one specific instructor, whose style resonated with him. He explained, "I could relate to [one instructor] because [they have] a little bit of [a condition] and kind of jumping around more and I could see that in [their] personality, and how and I could relate to that myself." In discussing perceived distances between online teachers and students, Emerson felt reassured that "their personality comes across for sure." He also felt that a student could glean a preview of an instructor's personality based on their research interests. He continued, "...seeing the different specialties of research is really the main window that's provided." Emerson also shared that recollections of interactions with teachers were not always episodic. He explained: "It's not always an episodic memory but it's more a change in how you approach things. You see somebody else format[ting] or editing, and you're like, 'I'm going to take this,' and suddenly you're incorporating [a] new process."

Emerson was in the early stages of his program. Despite positive interactions, he did not feel particularly close to any one instructor yet. Direct and indirect teacher–student communication and the instructors' style therein all resonated with Emerson in a few different course-based interactions. His association of teacher persona with the design of an online course suggests that closeness in the teacher–student relationship may be difficult to sense when only exposed to one instructor for one course. In addition, he described the process of becoming a doctoral student as matriculating with instructors in *their* environment (e.g., attending conferences) as well as collaborating on publications. In his self-relation, his description of being a student was very self-reflective, self-aware, almost as if he understood how he would grow from being exposed to different online instructors in the program. He described associating an instructor's personality with their research interests, which speaks to his own curiosity in research and how he may be exploring a path forward and searching for guidance. In this way, he demonstrated a cautious optimism. He was eager to build relationships but also self-protective in keeping instructors at arm's length. Emerson was still gathering information about himself and others that demonstrated a relational curiosity rather than a strong sense of closeness within any one particular teacher–student relationship.

Kerri's Experience

Kerri recalled and described three different instructors, each with distinct teaching styles: one as "approachable, flexible, and down-to-earth," another as having "quite high standards," and the third as offering "constructive criticism." Generally speaking, Kerri expressed a positive disposition toward the program, her instructors, and her experiences. She explained, "I would characterize myself a year ago [as] nervous and [un]sure, and a year later, as two different people …that's due to the instructors and the intentionality they build into the courses …ways for people to interact …feel more comfortable."

Although she had only been exposed to a small number of instructors, Kerri described a sense of closeness to her research advisor emerging from a series of interactions that included receiving feedback on academic work and receiving encouragement and support for pursuing publication. She explained:

> My [research advisor] had a positive influence …something really positive was, at the end of the class, [they] said, 'you should pursue publication on this, let's work on this

> together.' …It was a series of interactions, getting positive feedback, improving my paper, and culminating in 'I'm willing to help you take it a step further.' We're [also] trying to co-develop a grant together. …it'd be nice to take more classes with [them to] get a better feel for [their] instructional type outside the one class I've taken with [them].

Kerri's experiences with her research advisor were generally positive. She described how this instructor's feedback empowered her to make mistakes. She also conveyed that the quality of her academic work was acknowledged and valued by this instructor in their willingness to support the publication process, which resonated with her positively. Kerri developed a sense of closeness to this instructor that was enabled via direct teacher–student communication and further shaped by the instructor's teacher persona and communicative style.

Kerri wanted to pursue the relationship with her research advisor further but struggled with self-relating. On one hand, she respected the boundaries of the teacher–student relationship and recognized how communication technology can shape and color teacher–student interactions. Still, she yearned for more video interaction. For Kerri, synchronous video-based communication with her research advisor and other instructors may have helped build relationships, noting how Zoom sessions helped "humanize" experiences and improve instructor familiarity. She also felt that she could exhibit *her* personality in a "humanizing" way in annotations that she placed in Google Docs, suggesting that instructors might glean her personality from such comments. In these ways, Kerri exhibited a desire to build relationships with instructors through direct and indirect communication. On the other hand, Kerri also expressed that she was "self-directed and could manage her time" but struggled with unclear feedback from instructors. She hesitated to ask for clarification, fearing it would "expose ignorance" and be bothersome (i.e., infringing on an instructor's time). As a result, she sought help from peers, concealing her uncertainties from her instructors, including her research advisor, despite her confidence in task completion. This tension highlighted her desire to connect while grappling with self-doubt and the fear of judgment.

Kerri's experience suggests that sensing closeness may be shaped by direct interactions and also by one's capacity to trust both instructors and oneself. Kerri described sensing closeness with her research advisor that began with course-based interactions and moved into other forms of collaboration, yet also noted wanting to "get to know" her research advisor better "if [they] were going to be working together *that* way." Her experiences suggest that sensing closeness in the teacher–student relationship may emerge from direct teacher–student communication alone in a single course, but may also be dependent upon continued communication and interaction beyond a single course.

Rory's Experience

Rory remembered his most recent instructor for teaching the "most organized and well-run course out of all that I'd taken so far." He also expressed that "every professor has their own style of doing things." He recalled positive experiences with four different instructors: enjoying the content presentation from one, learning a lot as a teaching assistant to another, appreciating helpful explanations from a third, and respecting the strict yet valuable feedback from the fourth. Rory developed a sense of closeness to these four instructors due to prolonged communication, interaction, the teaching assistant role, and receiving feedback on academic work. He described his research advisor as smart and helpful in developing his research, while also feeling a personal

connection with his teaching assistant mentor through regular Zoom meetings. Rory sensed closeness to these instructors, which included sustained communication and interaction. He explained, "...the ones that I've had to just communicate with more I've gotten in a closer relationship to …[my research advisor], [my teaching assistant mentor] just because I had to regularly communicate with them, that was a part of it."

Rory also sensed closeness to two other instructors from course-based interactions, one for providing robust feedback, answering questions, and engaging in discussion forums. He explained:

> I was kind of more drawn to [this instructor] just because I love the way [they] had set up [their] class …[they] would clearly respond to my questions …give so much feedback [read] our discussion posts …so that kind of drew me to [them] as a professor, even though I didn't have that same relationship where I had to speak to [them] regularly every week in a you know Zoom conference like I did with [my research advisor] and [my teaching assistant mentor]... [they're] just approachable… I feel comfortable with [them] and I just had [them] as my professor for a semester, and [they] just engaged with me like [they] did with anyone else so I guess that online presence is really just that level of engagement that they give and how well they're able to communicate.

The other instructor, with a different teaching style that initially intimidated Rory, ultimately earned Rory's appreciation and respect for their approach to teaching, particularly resonating in the feedback provided on his academic work. He explained:

> I don't know, [they] had a way. It's something I can't describe. I don't know what [their] style is; [they were] very blunt, [they] pushed me hard to do good … unlike other professors, [they'd] call me out. What I'm saying is personal, when [they] leave comments and everything, [they'll] let me know how it is… Writing is never my strong suit, but I grew, I learned a lot.

Rory was exposed to different types of communication and interactions with instructors from which he sensed closeness. He described sensing closeness to his research advisor and teaching assistant mentor due to frequent and prolonged communication and interaction, along with sensing closeness to two different instructors stemming from course-based interactions. Rory demonstrated an awareness and sensitivity to direct and indirect teacher–student communication in these teacher–student relations. For Rory, a sense of closeness emerged with one instructor, in part, due to the design of the course (i.e., indirect teacher–student communication) when he affirmed that "I love the way [they] had set up [their] class." His sense of closeness to this instructor was also influenced by direct communication with the instructor, stemming from feedback on his academic work.

Direct teacher–student communication with other instructors also resulted in a sense of closeness, although the nature of these communicative exchanges were somewhat different with each instructor. He received feedback from his research advisor on research interests and ideas, and from his teaching assistant mentor on teaching style, with sustained conversations allowing personal aspects to evolve, fostering a relaxed and casual exchange between teacher and student

beyond academic feedback. However, he found feedback on assignments and discussions from other instructors profoundly helpful, despite taking only one course with each. Both instructors had different communication styles; each resonated with him. He sensed closeness to one instructor based on the abundance of feedback, which he felt revealed instructor engagement, online presence, and teacher style. He sensed closeness to the other instructor as a more knowledgeable other, demonstrating instructor engagement, online presence, and teacher style, yet in different ways that did not manifest positive emotions in Rory. In his self-relation, he gained an appreciation for the teacher persona of the latter instructor as it helped him grow as a student. Rory's experiences also suggest that a student may sense closeness in the teacher–student relationship even when it is not explicitly recognized or reciprocated by the instructor. For example, both instructors providing feedback on academic work were likely doing so instinctually, out of duty or habit, and not necessarily doing so with the intention of building relational closeness or mutuality in the relationship.

Rylee's Experience

Rylee was writing a dissertation and felt that being an online teacher and an online student provided perspectives that informed one another. Rylee found one course lacking instructor presence but overall felt that instructors were engaged, creating a welcoming online learning environment. Rylee also perceived the instructors in the program as busy, a preoccupation that seemed to shape their availability and engagement in teaching. Rylee did not sense closeness with any instructors in the program, though they expressed an awareness of its potential development. They explained, "I honestly don't have a close relationship with any instructors, not even my advisor. I wished that we had developed [it] earlier. [Now], I feel it's kind of late. Not one instructor in the entire program knows me well."

Rylee attributed this disconnect to several factors, including limited awareness of opportunities to engage with instructors, shifting job locations and research interests, and a perceived lack of agency in relationship-building as a student. They explained:

> ...it's a possibility there's this disconnect, there could be some space outside [a] course to get to know [instructors and] for them to get to know you, but I [haven't] felt compelled to participate in any of those opportunities …I would have strategically connect[ed] with instructors who had expertise in a particular area, but I moved my research focus so many times … I've never looked at instructors as peers or colleagues, and that could be a barrier for some of the relationship building.

Rylee expressed that they were starting to get to know their research advisor more but did not sense closeness in any teacher–student relationship. Rylee discussed receiving feedback on academic work as both positive and negative, feeling impressed when feedback was relevant to their specific research area but frustrated when an instructor expected more from their work, considering page requirements arbitrary and exhausting. Rylee exhibited self-relation relative to relationship building and demonstrated some personal ownership of any shortcomings in teacher–student relationships. Yet, Rylee's experiences suggest that sensing closeness in the teacher–student relation is not experienced by all students. Further, Rylee's experiences suggest that a student's awareness of closeness in the teacher–student relation embodies self-relation. Rylee had prolonged exposure to different instructors, experiencing both positive and negative emotions in various communicative exchanges, which led to a sense of disconnect. Such mixed

emotions highlight that sensing closeness to instructors may be influenced not only by interaction opportunities but also by students' underlying motivations and expectations for engagement.

Leila's Experience

Leila was also writing her dissertation and enjoyed teaching online and the flexibility of asynchronous online learning. Overall, she described a positive disposition about the program and her experiences with different instructors. She described having "strong impressions" of three instructors: Her research advisor's support, prompt feedback, and regular video meetings left a positive impact; serving as a teaching assistant helped her know another instructor in a casual and informal way, and she resonated with the teaching style of a third. Leila appreciated instructors' efforts in creating engaging classes through personalized videos, curated content, active presence, and consistent feedback, approaches she considered as enhancing her learning experience and teacher–student interactions. She explained:

> There's a couple professors who go out of their way to put something of themselves into the class every week… one does weekly videos, they're just a minute long but it gave you a sense of [them] being there …[they] would respond in the discussions, you could tell [they were] reading everything ….there was an element of curation to how [they] approached the classes, which at the doctoral level felt appropriate …I've modeled some practices of my own on that …[They were] another who was very good about having a very visual and active presence in the class, [they were] extremely consistent, you would see new content Tuesday by noon, and feedback at a certain time, [in] a certain form so that was very effective.

Teacher persona resonated with Leila, and she attributed her awareness of teacher persona to previously teaching in face-to-face classrooms and "having gone through some teacher training." In this program, Leila had some choice as to who her research advisor was but also described not having a choice as to who her instructors were on a course-by-course basis. Leila described how an instructor's teacher persona shaped her learning experiences and engagement, noting that she felt more aligned with some approaches than others. She explained, "I never had a choice of instructors... there are people I wouldn't take again because their style is frustrating to me, but there are plenty of others I would take again, having taken one already."

Leila reflected on the professionalism and evolving power dynamics in teacher–student relationships in online settings. Her descriptions suggest that doctoral students may bring their own prior experiences and expectations about communication, interaction, and instructor roles, which shape how they engage with faculty and coursework. Leila's experiences also highlight the potential for a teacher's style to have either positive or negative emotional connotations that inform student actions, reactions, and behaviors. She considered her online instructors still as "teachers" because she has not graduated yet but considered other instructors (outside of the study site) as colleagues. Leila also discussed that consistent, clear, and sustained communication were advantageous to the teacher–student relationship, especially with one-to-one feedback from instructors on academic work. Leila was seemingly very aware of the teacher–student relationship and understood it quite profoundly, describing her engagement with instructors as intentional and adaptive. She expressed how her communication and interaction with her instructors was predominately academics-related, career-focused, or professionally

based and that this made sense, was expected, hoped for, and appropriate. Leila sensed closeness to instructors that had teaching styles that resonated with her own. She also described attempting to tailor, match, or model an instructor's communication prose back to the instructor via email as a way to communicate more efficiently and effectively, wanting to emulate student behavior that she would appreciate as an instructor.

Brax's Experience

Brax was a recent graduate of the program and remembered ten different instructors from the program, one of whom was his research advisor and one of whom he met at graduation. He remembered the other eight instructors from the courses that he completed. Brax's general disposition about the program, the instructors, and his experiences were overwhelmingly positive. He described being drawn to instructors that were leaders in their fields and in online education. He explained, "I gravitate to the ones that lead. They're not like, 'here's my canned course…' It's, 'I'm going to lead you, I'm going to be your professor,'…for the most part, all of them in the program were like that."

He described three instructors in particular as having a "commanding online presence" and "very well-designed courses." Brax described feeling a sense of closeness to these three instructors as their teaching styles resonated with him. He explained:

> ...it was their teaching style, their ability to connect with students. They had [a] commanding online presence, like a brand, very intentional interaction, communication, presence, they were very involved, they're not just this face behind a screen ...we're not being forced to connect [and] that made me feel more connected to them ...they get to know you at a professional [and] personal level …I was connected to them, even in those interactions that we're at a distance, it wasn't always school, we talked about work, life.

Brax described how these three instructors, including his research advisor, established professional and personal connections with him, indicating their interest in maintaining a professional relationship beyond graduation, treating him more like a colleague than a student. He explained, "...they never treat you like 'I'm this professor, you're this student' …that relationship exists but 'I'm here to help, I want to be your peer'… 'let's cement that professional relationship, we're peers, let's do things together'..."

Brax sensed closeness to certain instructors that stemmed from a combination of direct and indirect teacher–student communication, teacher persona, and self-relation. He took many courses with his research advisor and two other instructors, describing his dissertation committee relationship as "particularly strong." In addition, he noted that his courses felt intentionally designed (i.e., predetermined or scaffolded) but not prescriptive. Several instructors exhibited welcoming and affable teaching styles, "folks who [were] not afraid to take on the challenge of working at a distance." Brax often viewed these experiences through the structure of the program, but he also described a gradual shift in how he related to certain instructors, moving from a student-teacher dynamic to a more collegial rapport after graduation. Self-relation was also present in how Brax described receiving feedback on academic work from different instructors, with detailed, guided feedback evoking emotional resonance, while less guided, open-ended feedback evoked dissonance. For instance, he described struggling with one instructor's feedback style, which felt less structured and left him uncertain about how to apply

it. This experience contributed to his disengagement with a particular research methodology, as he perceived a mismatch between his current expertise and the expectations set by the instructor. He explained: “I would never expect my master students to be at my level. I would expect them to be at the master student level... I get it, we’re doc students but we’re also not perfect and we need help and support to get there.” In his self-relation, Brax attributed emotional dissonance to feeling less supported, although he acknowledged being a doctoral student, he paradoxically was quick to dismiss the doctoral station and that the feedback provided by the instructor was intended to guide him. In this way, Brax displayed a conflict between his self-image as a student and how his instructor asked him to see himself in this specific communicative interaction. In this instance, the instructor’s communicative style did not resonate with Brax, but he maintained that this instructor was “brilliant… wonderful at the research [they] do.”

Brief and Unexpected Experiences of Closeness

In the following section, two extracts of participant experiences were analyzed relative to lived time, lived body, and lived space. These two extracts are representative of short communicative exchanges that arose between a student and a teacher and were selected to illustrate a range of emotional responses in sensing closeness in the teacher–student relation.

April’s Experience

April described feeling closer to her research advisor because they had “constant” communication and recounted a specific, brief, and unexpected experience of closeness with them. She explained: “When I got a new puppy, we’re both German shepherd fans …we’re talking about dogs, sending pictures …I have a really great connection with [them], but I think that’s just because [they’re] my advisor in the program.”

The experience of getting a pet, of conversing about that experience with another person, and sharing pictures of pets tend to evoke positive feelings that can be traced in terms of both lived body and lived space. Sharing pictures and accounts about their dogs can be said to have oriented teacher and student around a common time: the present in their engagement with their pets. It also brought them together around a common (but admittedly still divided) space: the “here” of their homes or domestic environments, which they shared with their pets. It is perhaps not surprising that this experience of a common space and time brought the two closer in their relationship, as it is certainly more concrete and unambiguously positive than discussions about a student’s writing or about feedback on a submitted document. Important, also, in this communicative exchange between April and her advisor, is how April was relating to herself in the teacher–student relation (e.g., describing her experiences, her eagerness to share, her excitement about pet ownership). In this way, sensing closeness requires, in part, an awareness of individuality, a consciousness of our influence on others, and what we desire or need from others. In April’s description of this communicative exchange, it is evident that the experience was not prolonged. The experience was rapid and intense. Although April described sensing closeness to a teacher based on shared and immediate experiences, one cannot assume that such personal qualities are the only ways in which closeness can emerge between teacher and student in relation.

Relating to someone based on these and other moments of sharing can emerge in subtle and complex ways and circumstances. For instance, when viewing a film, one might relate to a character in a scene, or when listening to music one might relate to the melody, the lyric, or the

composer, or when browsing social media one might relate to the posting of a complete stranger. In an educational context, these moments may similarly arise between teacher and student in both the direct and indirect communication taking place between them. While direct communication between teacher and student in online settings may rise and fall relatively quickly, indirect communication manifests a certain constancy (e.g., through ever-present course design, curricula, instructor-created videos, and so on). April's experience also exemplifies how the time of the teacher–student relation is discontinuous: Sharing their experience about their pets only lasted briefly in their communication. At the same time, the feelings involved in such an exchange may linger. In April's description of her experience, closeness appeared suddenly, prompted by a sudden communicative exchange with a teacher; however, she ended up attributing this closeness to their regular and ongoing communication throughout the course.

Leila's Experience

Leila experienced a moment of perceived disconnect in a brief communicative exchange with an instructor. She described a challenging interaction during a synchronous Zoom meeting that was shaped, in part, by prior perceptions of the instructor. Her disposition during the meeting was influenced by a previous instance of indirect teacher-student communication initiated by the instructor. She explained, "[This instructor] has a tendency to go on, to complain on social media about students in general and forget that students can see it, so I may have already had a negative feeling about that before we met."

The experience of scanning social media for context cues about others can evoke both positive and negative feelings. Feelings of joy may arise when scrolling past a witty meme or feelings of anger or disgust may arise when scrolling past that same meme. Feelings will vary by taste and individuality but are felt, nevertheless. Leila described a distaste for this particular exchange as she interpreted it as personally directed. Like April's experience, however, it is impossible to know or assume how the instructor felt at this moment. Leila's experience alludes to several aspects of the teacher–student relation that include teacher persona, direct and indirect communication, and self-relation. Her description suggests that students may enter into direct communication in the teacher–student relationship with preconceived notions about a teacher or their teacher persona. The Zoom meeting she described as a negative experience was direct teacher–student communication, whereas the posting on social media was indirect. Yet, this indirect communication stirred such a sudden and intense emotional response that Leila could not let it go when meeting and communicating directly with the instructor. What Leila's experience illuminates is the subtle and overt implications of the communicative exchanges (that may span multiple communicative episodes) that surrounds the teacher–student relation and how sudden and perhaps nuanced the exchanges can be that at once constitute and also color the relationship either positively or negatively over the course of its existence.

Discussion

The lived experiences of students in this study show various teacher–student relationships, including those with research advisors, as teaching assistants, and with specific instructors through courses, program coordination, and scholarly pursuits (e.g., grants, publications). Each type of teacher–student relationship may require further investigation as several factors may influence emotions and communication (Quinlan, 2016), and students will undoubtedly encounter different levels of predictability and dependability in each relationship.

For instance, research has shown that supportive or difficult teacher–student relations during the dissertation process can significantly affect students (Burkard et al., 2014). Dynamics like interdependence or long-term commitment in these relationships may influence perceptions of closeness differently than teacher–student relations in short-term, course-based interactions.

This study explored how the emotional context of teaching interactions shaped the dynamics of teacher–student relationships in a fully online doctoral program, including moments of closeness, ambiguity, and perceived distance. Participant descriptions revealed that a sense of closeness may develop gradually through ongoing communication and interaction or in very instantaneous and granular ways (i.e., brief moments when a student receives or is exposed to teacher), such as receiving feedback on academic work, viewing instructor-created videos, attending instructor-led synchronous sessions, or interpreting an instructor's communication prose in email, course-based announcements, discussion boards, or social media. Participant descriptions suggest that sensing closeness in the teacher–student relationship is experienced individually and requires a degree of student self-awareness in the relationship. Teachers may not share or be aware of students' emotional resonance with their communication or teacher personas. For example, Rory's experiences in course-based interactions with two different instructors suggest that the instructors communicated out of habit, not necessarily out of a shared sense of closeness. In an online learning environment, students sensing closeness to teachers may also confound teachers as they often cannot observe how students engage with the content they create or respond to the feedback they provide as they would in traditional in-person classroom settings. Moreover, moments of perceived disconnect did not always signal relational absence but instead revealed shifts in engagement, differing expectations, or tensions in communication. Relational ambiguity emerged when participants were uncertain about the depth of their connection with instructors, particularly in infrequent interactions or when navigating professional boundaries. These findings suggest that closeness is not simply the presence of positive emotions, nor is disconnect the absence of relationship; rather, both are shaped by how students interpret and navigate their interactions over time, including moments of brevity, unexpected connection, or discontinuous engagement.

Four aspects of closeness in the teacher–student relation emerged in this study: direct teacher–student communication, indirect teacher–student communication, self-relation, and style or the communication of personality (teacher persona). Each of these four aspects are influential to experiences of closeness and are discussed in greater depth below.

Direct Teacher–Student Communication

The preponderance of participant descriptions of feedback or lack of feedback on their academic work supports findings of previous studies that suggest a strong correlation exists between connectedness and instructor feedback (see Gallien & Oomen-Early, 2008; Glazer & Wanstreet, 2011; LaBarbera, 2013). Additionally, studies have shown that clarity, timeliness, delivery method, and the credibility of instructor feedback may influence students' perceptions of connectedness (Poulos & Mahony, 2008; Sheridan & Kelly, 2010). Together, these and other findings, along with our own, hint at a nuanced distinction between connectedness and closeness. While consistent and reliable communication can gradually cultivate a sense of closeness over time, moments of unexpected or discontinuous interaction may also contribute to students' sense of relational engagement with their instructors.

Participants described instances of engaging with instructors feedback as a form of relational connection, even when emotional resonance was not explicitly mutual (i.e., the students not knowing the teacher's style or personality). This suggests that closeness may emerge from a foundation of predictability and dependability in teacher–student interactions, irrespective of shared emotional connection. For example, Kerri developed a sense of closeness with her research advisor, appreciating the positive feedback and encouragement for publication despite not having extensive interactions, synchronous or otherwise. However, further research is needed to understand the communicative role of *feedback* in fostering closeness, especially in online settings, as participants' experiences suggest that closeness may develop even when feedback elicits a negative emotional response. Emerson, for instance, appreciated the mentorship and personal insights shared by his instructors but did not yet feel particularly close to any one instructor. This highlights that while feedback may contribute to a sense of connection, other factors (e.g., time in the program, online teaching experience, or prior exposure to online learning) might shape the development of closeness. Our inclination is that an instructor's acknowledgment via feedback on a student's academic work establishes a personal connection, a communicative episode that is often the first and most direct exposure of the teacher to the student in online learning environments. This acknowledgement, whether perceived positively or negatively by the student, outweighs the content of the exchange itself. While students expect to receive feedback on their work, being "seen" in this way may briefly heighten their emotional response, especially as they may have a limited exposure to and understanding of the instructor's teaching style and personality prior to that moment.

Participants also described how nonverbal cues in synchronous video-based communication (e.g., Zoom, Google Hangouts) informed their perceptions of instructors' teacher personas, shaping and orienting their sense of closeness either positively or negatively. Brax, for instance, described developing a sense of closeness with instructors who displayed a commanding online presence and engaged in regular Zoom meetings. Such interpretations influenced participants' sense of closeness to teachers either by supporting or opposing their preconceived ideas of teacher persona. Martin et al. (2018) found a small correlation between instructor use of synchronous videoconferencing features (e.g., polls, emoticons, whiteboard, text, or audio and video chat) and student perceptions of connectedness to instructors. More research is needed, but these findings, along with our own, suggest that certain features of synchronous communication technology (e.g., video chat or webcam use) may afford students with revelations of teacher personas not otherwise available in asynchronous text-based communication alone (see Gherheș et al., 2021; Richardson & Lowenthal, 2017). Participants noted that both recurring and intermittent synchronous interactions allowed them to experience their instructor's personality in authentic, casual, and informal ways. For example, recurring sessions with research advisors allowed a sense of closeness to emerge for Rory, Leila, and Brax. However, Rory and Leila, and several other participants also found that viewing instructor-created videos asynchronously in a single online course allowed a sense of closeness to emerge as they were able to experience the instructor's teacher persona individually and on their own terms. Similarly, April's experience of exchanging messages and sharing pictures asynchronously with her advisor in a single online course allowed a sense of closeness to emerge as she was able to connect with her advisor on a personal level outside of formal interactions.

Students often form assumptions about teachers from peers, evaluations, bios, or social media, which are likely to persist in the student psyche until the student communicates directly with the teacher and can rectify the unknown with the actual on their own terms. In moments of such confirmation, the student is likely unwavering in their opinion (good or bad), and in moments of opposition, the experience is likely pleasantly or unpleasantly surprising. Thus, sensing closeness may develop or be moderated by preconceived ideas of others (good or bad).

Indirect Teacher–Student Communication

The design of an online course appears to influence student perceptions of closeness in the teacher–student relation. Each participant expressed (dis)interest in getting to know specific instructors better based on the design of the online course the instructor taught. Participants described feeling as if the design of the online course mirrored the motivation and interest of the instructor. When participants perceived the course design favorably, they also perceived the instructor favorably. Favorable online courses included structure, sequence, clarity, curation and organization, and students associated these design characteristics with positive instructor attributes (e.g., caring, organized, invested, supportive). Shea et al. (2005) suggested that the design of an online course can have a positive effect on "students' sense of being connected with and supported by their instructor" (p. 72). Conversely, in unfavorable online courses, participants perceived the content in the learning management system as outdated, inaccessible, or lacking organization and clarity. One participant noted, "...even naming files appropriately… little things that made the course easy to follow" signified instructor commitment. Participants discussed how in the absence of instructor curation or attention to course-related details they were left to their own devices to construct meaning or "guessing," often turning to peers for support in understanding resources and materials.

The interplay of indirect teacher–student communication and teacher persona became evident as participants drew associations and inferences about teaching persona from the design of an instructor's online course that positioned course design as a meaningful communicative act. Such indirect communication seemingly affords students an initial impression, an assumptive opportunity that the teacher is not similarly afforded at the same time, suggesting that initial impressions may be discontinuous for both students and teachers in online learning environments. For students, early assumptions about their teachers can shape their engagement and openness in the course, which might be disrupted by subsequent experiences that contradict those assumptions (see Bélanger & Longden, 2009). For teachers, forming impressions of students often requires more time and interaction, leading to a delayed and potentially fragmented understanding of students' perspectives and needs (see Forster-Heinzer et al., 2020). This asymmetry and potential discontinuity in forming initial impressions may influence experiences of closeness, as both students and teachers must navigate their perceptions and expectations over time.

Teacher Persona and Student Self-Relation

Etymologically, the word *persona* derives from the Latin or Ancient Greek connotation of wearing a mask, referring to the personality or social role one presents or adopts. In education, teacher and student personas represent different social roles. These personas can vary widely, such as the dutiful student or strict teacher, but commonalities exist among the teacher and student personas in how they emerge or are shown to one another. Yet, a shortcoming of the

student persona, is that “an unrealistic view of the self is often part of the student persona” (Steiner, 2014, para. 4). Meaning, students may not see themselves for who they truly are in the persona they choose to embody and display to teachers. Misaligning or lacking such self-awareness provides greater freedom from the responsibility of the student role and challenges educators in deciphering a student’s individuality or individual needs. Further, the pedagogical relation is asymmetrical in that the balance of power tilts in favor of the teacher (Friesen, 2017). As such, students are disadvantaged by stereotypical student personas and need to possess the apt self-awareness to overcome such stereotypes as well as the motivation and courage to reveal themselves to teachers so that they can be seen as who they truly are or what they truly need in their present and future selves.

Participant descriptions of teacher persona also shed light on how students experience and interpret teacher persona in a distance learning environment. Teacher persona permeated through the communication media students encountered, including emails, discussion forums, course-based announcements, feedback on academic work, synchronous meetings, and asynchronous video recordings. Additionally, the interplay of teacher persona and self-relation is informative as it captures how students may be drawn to teachers that resonate with their own personalities or aspirations as teachers. Similarity-attraction theory may inform this interplay in the teacher–student relation (see Berscheid & Walster, 1969; Byrne 1961, 1971). Yet, this occurrence may be more nuanced than similarity-attraction in the teacher–student relation. For example, Rory sensed closeness to an instructor whose style did not resonate with Rory. In this instance, and instances of the like, it is possible that the teacher persona acts as a catalyst toward self-relation like looking in a mirror. Style (1996) provided a metaphor for the curriculum as a window and a mirror. Style posits, “if the student is understood as occupying a dwelling of self, education needs to enable the student to look through window frames to see the realities of others and into mirrors to see her/his own reality reflected” (p. 1). Like curriculum, students may experience teachers as windows into other realities and mirrors that spark introspection. Students may perceive teachers as mirrors in that the more self-aware students are, the more apt they may be to sense closeness in the relation and navigate it appropriately.

Different communication theories offer possible explanations for typified personas in online settings. For instance, the online disinhibition effect posits that individuals communicate differently in online environments compared to in-person environments as online communication acts as both a shield and a sword in online interactions with far less physical consequence (Suler, 2004). Still, other studies suggest that silent or uncommunicative behaviors are common online (Creelman, 2017; Smith & Smith, 2014). In either case, the persona the student chooses to embody in online spaces is not the mirror as in Style’s metaphor; it is in fact the teacher persona that reflects the students to themselves, and the student must be ready and willing to experience their reflection.

Moreover, the power dynamics in the teacher–student relationship inform a sense of closeness, affecting how students relate to the teacher persona and themselves. Participants described how they did not always feel comfortable communicating and interacting with teachers. For example, Kerri’s experiences highlighted how power dynamics affected her interactions; she felt hesitant to seek clarification and feared judgment, impacting her self-confidence and sense of closeness with instructors. Hesitancy, in these instances, stemmed from

participants seeing themselves as less knowledgeable, incompetent, lacking confidence, or feeling as if their research interests were too far removed from instructor expertise. Participants also conveyed that at times they felt that their instructors were busy and, as such, they did not want to be bothersome or intrude on an instructor's time, highlighting the influence of perceived authority on student-teacher interactions, as exemplified by Rylee's reluctance to engage with instructors due to feeling less knowledgeable and competent, and fearing their research interests were too distant from instructor expertise (see Jónsson, 2023; Murray, 2007). Although the participants in this study were all adult learners, they described being intimidated by and fearful of a more knowledgeable teacher (see Rowe & Fitness, 2018). Seemingly, participants who had previous teaching experience were more in tune with this power dynamic and their experiences may have informed their self-relation in ways to which other students may have not yet been exposed or capable of, as expressed by Leila and Brax, whose descriptions showcased a transition from student to peer. Additionally, participants described how they often did not have a choice as to who their instructor was for many of the courses in this particular program, (see *bounded communities*, Wilson et al., 2004, p. 2). Participants conveyed that they were generally appreciative of the structure of the program, yet reducing students' choice of instructor may moderate their sense of closeness in the teacher–student relationship.

The teacher–student relationship is different from other relationships in our lives. Participants described this relationship as professional, collegial, mentorial, and personal. Although students described how they felt that they knew more personal information about some instructors compared to other instructors based on what these instructors chose to share in their communication and interaction, the relationship is personal in that students grapple with, navigate, and experience the relationship individually. The relational quality of closeness may or may not appear for all students in the teacher–student relation. Yet, there are moments that strike an emotional chord, tone, or response within students, shaping whether or not they permit closeness to develop in this relation. Importantly, these moments do not always have to be shared, resonate universally, or have a positive emotional connotation for a sense of closeness to emerge.

Limitations

The findings of this study cannot be generalized. Participants' experiences may not reflect the views of other students in online doctoral programs. Readers of this study must bring in their own experience and critical judgment to moderate this limitation, with acknowledgment that different readers will do so differently. The first author's experience in the program as a student and researcher gave him greater understanding of some particularities of participant experience but also limited his purview to just one program. Other researchers, even those with similar backgrounds, could interpret the data differently.

Participants were also in different stages of the program (e.g., completing coursework, writing dissertations, and recent graduates) and described varied perspectives and experiences of closeness in the teacher–student relation. However, these participants are not entirely representative of the breadth of individuality that students may embody. Nonetheless, phenomenological research gains its value by producing descriptions and interpretations whose

value and validity is recognized not just on a conscious, critical level but also on one that is non-cognitive, emotive, and intuitive (Friesen, 2023).

Conclusion

Research has shown that the distant or online learner is often relegated to a position of inherent self-direction and autonomy, which requires at least a partially developed understanding of oneself as a learner. In such environments, it may be unrealistic to expect students to independently arrive at this kind of meaning-making and self-realization without support. A student's relationship with their teacher is personal and often fleeting, yet it can leave a lasting impression beyond immediate or ongoing communication. In this way, the teacher–student relationship is not necessarily bi-directional or reciprocal but shaped by the student's individual interpretation and sensitivity to their own growth and development.

Such an interpretation of closeness suggests that the terms *connectedness* and *closeness* may be similar but not synonymous relative to teacher–student relationships. For instance, connectedness presupposes mutuality or perhaps a reciprocity of emotions of subjects in relation. However, such mutuality, shared faith, or emotional reciprocity between subjects are not necessarily presupposed in our understanding of closeness in the teacher–student relation: We understand that closeness may well be perceived in feelings more related to antipathy, ambivalence, or appreciation, rather than reciprocity and mutuality. Future studies may benefit from such an interpretation.

This study adds to the research on personal aspects of the teacher–student relationship and fills a noted gap in the literature. The four aspects of closeness described in this study provide a model of this relational phenomenon and shed light on the little-studied postsecondary teacher–student relations that unfold online. Moreover, the open-ended phenomenological focus on student experience provides a novel contribution to research into teacher–student relationships more broadly.

The emotional context of teaching interactions is personal. Students grapple with several aspects of closeness that include direct and indirect teacher–student communication, self-relation, and teacher persona. Each of these provides different areas for future research in distance learning environments, as well as nuanced pathways or lines of inquiry in the establishment of trust between teachers and students. The findings of this study suggest that the interplay of these four aspects are inseparable from the relational quality of closeness. Future studies could explore students' intrinsic and extrinsic motivations relative to self-relation with teachers with different student populations, courses, and programs. Further, studying experiences of closeness resulting from indirect teacher–student communication alone could shed light on the atmosphere of this relation and the multiple ways the student is exposed to the teacher in online settings. Findings from this study suggest that a student's sense of closeness may emerge in asynchronous communication and interaction alone. Yet, questions remain as to whether or not the communicative aspects that color and surround the teacher–student relation in predominantly asynchronous communication constitute a mutually shared atmosphere.

There are multitudes of ways in which students and teachers communicate and interact in online settings, providing greater opportunities for experiences of closeness to emerge. Student and teacher experiences in online courses and programs will undoubtedly vary from person to person and course to course. However, the technologies that were formerly thought of as creating an undesirable distance between teachers and students may now present greater opportunities for varied and frequent teacher–student communication and interaction that might not have been previously possible with in-person instruction alone. Teacher persona has been studied in many ways, and similarity-attraction theory offers a plausible explanation, yet resonance with teacher persona or sensing closeness in the teacher–student relation is not relegated to teachers like ourselves. Lastly, there are many types of teacher–student relationships (e.g., research advisor, program coordinator, teaching assistant mentor) that moderate or exacerbate direct and indirect teacher–student communication that could be studied relative to sensing closeness in the teacher–student relation.

Declarations

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Appendix A

Semi-Structured Interview Questions

1. Can you describe your experiences teaching and learning online in general?
2. Approximately how many courses have you taken so far in the program?
3. Of the courses you have taken, which online instructors do you remember? What do you remember about those online instructors?
4. Which online instructors had a positive influence on you? What was it that made you consider this as positive? If needed: Could you provide a specific example of a positive interaction with an instructor?
5. Which online instructors had a negative influence on you? What was it that made you consider this as negative? If needed: Could you provide a specific example of a negative or frustrating interaction with an instructor?
6. How would you describe the relationship you had or have with your online instructors? If needed: How has this relationship changed post-graduation?
7. Do you feel drawn to specific online instructors? What was it that made you feel this way?
8. Do you feel that you know your online instructors on a personal level? Why or why not?
9. Do you feel that your online instructors know you on a personal level? Why or why not?
10. Do you communicate with online instructors outside of an online course? Why or why not? If needed: How did you communicate with them and why did you choose that method of communication?
11. Do you have control in how you communicate and interact with online instructors? Why or why not?