In the design studio learning environment, traditional student and staff expectations are of close contact teaching and learning. Recent class size increases have meant students experiencing reduced personal attention, increasingly feeling “anonymous” and correspondingly disengaged, to the detriment of their learning. Concurrently, there has been an increase in teaching by sessional (casual) staff, with varied levels of experience and assurance. While teachers primarily regard engagement as “cognitive and conative,” for students it is emotional: “…an essential need to feel that they were engaged with the context of their learning and that it was meaningful in some way” (Solomoniades and Martin 2008: 18).

As a response to these conditions, the Changing Relationships action-research project was run in 2009 and 2010, based on the premise that engaged teaching can encourage emotionally engaged learning. The project inverted the structure of the traditional QUT studio unit, empowering both students and sessional staff with a sense of increased autonomy: literally changing the relationships within the studio learning environment.

What we did

- Redesigned a School of Design studio unit to work with the inverted structure;
- A literature review identified four markers of student engagement: attendance, participation, learning, and performance and a corresponding staff resources pack was developed;
- Sessional staff were paid to devise an individual studio project, some individual lesson plans, two lectures, and to meet weekly through semester to reflect on their own and student engagement;
- Students and staff participated in surveys and focus groups evaluating their experiences across the four markers of engagement. Data on grades and student evaluations of the unit were also collected.

What we found: engaging students

- Students felt empowered by the opportunity to choose their studio project, and thus identify with their own lecturer and small class: that way toward the end of the semester you’re not feeling any sort of resentment about the project ... you invest a lot more time in it, and a lot more passion;
- Student responses to the survey questions indicated increased enthusiasm for attending and participating in classes compared to other units: it’s good to get up in the morning and actually look forward to coming in, rather than be going, oh I’m going to be sitting there and it’s not going to relate to anything that I’m doing;
- Students also reported more active participation in class activities due to feeling like a respected member of the class: The best aspects of the unit would be the tutorials because we were all able to communicate with each other about the work.
- Linked to these was student understanding that assessment performance is affected by attendance and participation. Focus groups reported that the majority of the class felt so much more positive about the subject than other subjects; everyone’s mark seems to be a lot better ... it’s obviously something done right to make people have a positive attitude and be getting better marks.

What we found: engaging staff

- Sessional staff reported positively about the benefits of increased autonomy and responsibility: I’ve certainly gained a new level of confidence ... The thing that I’ve really gotten myself was the ability to lead a studio and to provide whatever is wanted or needed in that environment. However, in 2009 two staff felt they needed more time and guidance than was available, which was remedied to good effect in 2010;
- Staff felt it was important that students see them giving their own lectures rather than only delivering content devised by the main lecturer, the least experienced stating: the confidence that was gained in giving those lectures was really beneficial for me;
- Staff felt more respected by the students than previously, which was as important to staff engagement as the respect of staff to student engagement.

Overall, the results support the premise that when students and staff feel part of a reasonably-sized studio class with a dedicated lecturer and self-selected project, the majority are inclined to value these relationships, to feel actively engaged, and to experience some improvement in their learning and teaching performances.