

Building and Maintaining Rapport in the Classroom

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I. What is rapport?

In an ideal world, students and instructors would have no question of whether or not they trusted and respected each other. Students would participate without resistance, and instructors would help to facilitate new intellectual discoveries. As we consider our post-pandemic teaching climate in higher education, perhaps you have experienced a sense of disconnection or a lack of engagement with students. Faculty may have few students who participate in class or visit their office hours, or may notice a decline in attendance. One way to characterize this situation is a feeling that we lack *rapport* with our class.

Rapport is defined as “*an especially harmonious or sympathetic connection.*” How do we go about intentionally forming this kind of connection? Why does it matter, and what benefits might it have to offer? This paper will address these questions and attempt to clear up a few possible misconceptions about rapport. While it may be easy to articulate both positive and negative extremes, navigating the line between professionalism and approachability can be difficult for some teachers. Scholars and educators have found their own ways to explain the concept of rapport. In his now classic book, *The Skillful Teacher*, Stephen Brookfield (1990) defines rapport as “the affective glue that binds education relationships together” (p. 163). Rapport sets the stage for positive learning outcomes, and it can encourage higher levels of participation. Feeling safe in the classroom can help students take more of the academic risks needed to engage in higher levels of learning and critical thinking, while knowing that faculty are there to provide assistance if/when necessary (Brookfield, 1990).

Though many definitions and metaphors for rapport exist, it can be a slippery concept. It is based in relationship, but what is the nature of that relationship? Buskist and Saville (2001) offer the idea that rapport *emerges* as the result of many little things done on a regular basis. The instructor delivers content, manages the learning environment, evaluates student performance and provides timely feedback. Although few of us are qualified therapists, most faculty know that students are experiencing a record number of mental health struggles and concerns and part of rapport may be suggesting a referral to professional services on campus such as the [Student Counseling Center](#) may be necessary or sharing resources such as the [Beyond OK](#) initiative. Rapport is not synonymous with entertainment or giving in to demands that do not line up with your teaching philosophy, but rather is a combination of effective teaching and evidence-based practice *and* care.

II. How do we develop rapport with our students?

So, how exactly do we develop rapport with our students? Linda Nilson (2010) implores instructors to start off on the right foot: “What you do and do not do the first day of class will affect your students’ and even your own expectation for the rest of the term” (Nilson, 2010, p. 45). Remember the power of first impressions! Practically speaking, you may want to consider the following tips:

- **Use the whole first day of class!** Dismissing early and/or taking the first day for granted can send the message that class time is not valuable, a message that can be hard to shake once it is communicated.
- **Learn (and use) students names!** According to Dr. James M. Lang in his book *Distracted: Why Students Can't Focus and What You Can Do About It* (2020), “Our names have tremendous power to capture our attention, beginning in infancy, and studies have demonstrated the connection between names and attention into adulthood (Lang, 2020, p. 107 and 108). Moreover, names allow you to personalize your interactions with students. (You can respond to student questions/answers by using their name and acknowledging what they had to contribute... e.g., “So, what Jon’s saying is...”)
 - At Texas Tech, you can obtain a list of student names/photos on Raiderlink (found on the faculty tab and called “class picture roster.”
 - You can ask students to make and use name cards or sit in the same seats. If you do ask them to do so, explain that this is for your benefit and that you appreciate their flexibility.
- **Introduce yourself!** This idea can apply to both students and instructors. This can be as simple as stating your name, major, hometown, or it can be elaborate as a more structured ice-breaker.
- **Set the tone!** As with using the whole first day, establishing ground rules from the beginning of the semester sends a clear message to your students. On the other hand, setting the tone can also include introducing the kinds of activities you want them to engage in. If you want your class to be participation and discussion based, it may be a good idea to have them discuss something on the first day (Nilson, 2010).

III. How do I create a sense of community in the classroom from day one?

The challenge of getting students to participate and interact is present throughout the semester, but it can be made especially difficult if the students sit passively from the first day, listening to you recite the syllabus. As an alternative, teachers can get students up and even moving around the class through the use of various ice-breakers. Ice-breakers can be either purely social or related to subject matter:

Social Ice-Breakers

- **Introductions** – Simple and direct. Limited by class size. Names, hometowns, majors, and maybe a ‘fun fact’ should suffice. A slightly more active version of this is to have students interview each other, with the each student sharing his/her partner’s fun fact/information. In addition, these can be written down for the instructor to refresh his/her memory.
- **‘Speed-Dating’** – Chaotic but highly interactive, speed-dating can be seen as round-robin pairs. Allowing a minute for students to introduce themselves and converse briefly allows for more personal interaction. This may take some arrangement on the instructor’s part, and you may need to break larger classes into a few smaller groups to minimize chaos.
- **Scavenger Hunt** – Even more chaos, but also fun and highly interactive, this idea allows students to find interesting facts about fellow students (and you as the teacher can participate, too). The instructor establishes a list of ‘items’ (someone who’s bilingual, someone from a different state/country, different majors, etc.), and the students go around the class trying to check these items off with the name of people they meet.

Subject-Matter Ice-Breakers

- **Knowledge Probes** – Like introductions, a simple and direct way to assess students’ previous knowledge of specific topics. Ask your students ‘what they know about...’ and have them write or discuss. These can be graded/ungraded, and you may discuss their answers or not.
- **Expectations Survey** – This is a more student-centered questionnaire, as you want to assess what students hope to gain from your course, the level of difficulty (and the amount of work) they expect to encounter, as well as what they hope/expect from you as instructor. Consider asking students to tell you one thing they want you to know about them. We have noticed that small tidbits that can help you know how to reach out or speak to the class. For example, a student may choose to express uncertainty about their ability to succeed in the class or may tell you that they work full-time.
- **Sample Quiz/Exam** – This allows students to get a taste of the course. You simply give your students a quiz or a sample question or two from an exam, allow them to work, and discuss what they knew/didn’t know and what they might learn in your class to help them answer it. Some instructors find it helpful to make a quiz on their course syllabus to drive home important points and policies.

Though many of these strategies may be slower or even infeasible in a large class, collecting such information (on index cards, for example) can help give instructors any idea of who the individuals are in their class, whether there are 10 or 200.

Sharing information is a useful way to expand upon knowing students’ names. That information can help you get a fuller picture of who your students are as people, and it may even give you a few ideas for how to tailor your course content and instruction to those interests. In addition, one

principle to keep in mind is that of reciprocity. If you want students to share who they are with you, it makes sense that you can share a little about yourself. Another principle to be mindful of is to only share what you feel comfortable sharing, and to hold the same expectation for your students. Probing, however well-intentioned, may have the opposite effect by making the student(s) feel as though their boundaries are not respected and/or personal space is being invaded.

IV. Letting your students know you

Teachers have the challenge of establishing both authority and flexibility, each without compromising the other (Brookfield, 1990). In addition to laying out the essential details of your syllabus (which, when organized and clear, is a tool in and of itself that is helpful in building rapport by communicating clear expectations and boundaries to your students), you have an opportunity to introduce your course, your subject matter and even your field. Feel free to address any of the following questions:

- **What fascinating things do you hope to introduce to your students?** In reflecting on this question, you are answering a question for your students: What should they look forward to in the class? Why should they feel excited about taking it?
- **What do you love about what you study and what you teach?** Keep in mind, enthusiasm is contagious, and so is a lack thereof. Reflecting on what ignites passion about your field/subject and communicating that excitement for the course and content can change how you come across to your students. Consciously or not, they are looking for cues to tune in or check out.
- **Share your journey...how did you get to where you are?** Consider the following questions: How did you get into your life of work/field of study? Where/what did you study? What were your experiences like as a student? (This can be especially helpful for first generation students and at risk students.)

Disclosing our passion for the subject can serve as a cue to our students. Conversely, a lack of enthusiasm (either explicitly or implicitly through our body language) can cue the students to tune out. Letting your students know a bit about who you are may make you seem a bit more approachable and accessible.

V. How do I maintain rapport throughout the semester?

In spite of plenty of recommendations about building rapport early in the semester, beginning on the very first day of class, rapport also requires maintenance. In class, this entails many things that are a part of responsible teaching:

- **Consistently utilize your office hours!** Time and class size allowing, consider meeting with your students individually throughout the first few weeks to help them feel more comfortable approaching you and coming to your regularly scheduled office hours in the future. Some faculty find that subtle changes like shifting the name to "Student Hours" and

agreeing to meet in a common area of the building you teach in such a lobby or public area designated for studying can also make a big difference in the number of students who show up.

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- **Be approachable/accessible:** Arriving early and staying a few minutes after class to answer students' questions, or even just to chat, can give students who have questions an immediate opportunity. If you chat with your students, try to systematically make your way to different parts of the class throughout the semester, so as to meet and greet as many of your students individually as you can.
- **Be mindful of students' lives outside class:** Not only do your students have other classes, but many of them have jobs, student organizations and aspirations aside from mastering your course material. Being mindful can include asking how students are doing that day, what they thought of a particular assignment, or even a question like: "How about that football/basketball game?", "Did anyone have a chance to attend the Carol of Lights?" or "Planning to participate in the Arbor Day activities on campus?" The point is simply to recognize them as people before you launch into your material/lecture for the day.
- **Give timely, reasoned feedback:** Grades can be a touchy subject for students (for a variety of reasons), and our handling of grading/feedback can contribute to or damage rapport. Providing clear and transparent assignment guidelines and adequate explanations in our feedback can help students see what standard we use to assess their work (rather than seeing the grade as an assessment of their abilities), and we may even offer suggestions/examples for ways to improve on future assignments.
- **Ask for feedback!** Formally or informally, giving students a voice can improve your relationship with them. Be it a mid-semester or end-of-semester evaluation, an assessment asking for anonymous feedback on what to start, what to stop and what to continue can provide valuable insight.

While appropriate teaching strategies, well-prepared materials and a mastery of our subject are all part of a great course, small, simple acts that characterize good relationships in any arena can pay dividends in shaping a healthy and productive learning environment. Simple, human acts such as making eye contact (while speaking AND while listening), smiling, and even cracking a joke now and then can all go a long way towards adding some levity to the day-to-day rhythm of class. The mental health and well-being of students is more of a concern than ever on our campus, and small daily acts of caring and civility can make a big difference while also modeling kindness and setting a positive tone.

In addition to all of these strategies, the relationship principles of disclosure, respect, and reciprocity apply. If we want our students to be interested and attentive in class, we can ask ourselves a few questions:

Questions for Instructor Reflection

- ✓ **If I want my students to pay full attention to me, do I give my full attention to student questions/answers both in class and in electronic communication?**
- ✓ **Do I encourage my students to listen and respond to each other?**
- ✓ **If we want our students to care, do they know that we care both about our course content and about them as individuals?**

Sources

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