

How Can I Build and Maintain Classroom Rapport?

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As a teaching consultant, I administer numerous mid-term student evaluations, across many academic disciplines, every semester. Whenever the students provide direct comments about their instructor, such as “she is passionate about the material,” “he has a good demeanor,” or, sadly, “she seems annoyed when the students ask questions” it can be helpful because it sheds light, more or less, on the rapport in the classroom.

Rapport is, in essence, the quality of the working relationship between an instructor and his or her students. And, there is ample research proving that rapport plays a significant role in teaching and learning (Fleming 2003). This white paper aims to inform the reader why having a strong rapport with students is imperative in the university classroom. It also provides some strategies for transforming the classroom into a personable yet professional place for learning.

Why is Classroom Rapport Important?

Rapport is significant because it provides the context for what actually takes place in the classroom. The relational nature between the instructor and the students becomes the framework through which effective learning occurs (Tiberius 1994). In more tangible terms, rapport affects:

- **The learning environment and classroom management.** Building a trustworthy relationship with students ensures that the classroom atmosphere is positive, collaborative, and supportive. Similarly, by establishing a communal and respectful place for learning, the students will perceive themselves to be part of a collective and, hence, are likely to behave according to its dynamics (Anderson 1999). Additionally, rapport can discourage academic dishonesty among the students. In the words of an undergraduate panelist at a recent TLPDC workshop, “It’s easier to cheat on a stranger.”
- **Student motivation and performance.** By creating a friendly but focused learning experience, it is likely that students will want to be in the instructor’s company and, accordingly, will want to come to class. Subsequently, it is apt that students will strive to work harder in order to eventually excel with the material and succeed in the class (Walsh 1996).

- **The well-being of the instructor.** Having a strong rapport with students can also be gratifying to the instructor. L. Dee Fink (1984) suggests that connecting with students is one of the critical factors determining personal fulfillment as an instructor.

Suggestions for Classroom Rapport

As you begin to consider the rapport that you want to have with your students, here are eight easy and time-efficient strategies that may come in handy. The first four suggestions can be used in the early days of the semester to initially build a working relationship with your students whereas the other four can be used throughout the remainder of the semester to maintain it.

When considering the following suggestions, select the ones that will fit your personality. Rapport comes more naturally to some people, so decide which of these will be most comfortable to you. Also, decide which of these will be most applicable to the size and type of class that you are teaching (i.e. lecture, discussion, lab, studio etc.). For example, if you are teaching a class with over 50 students, it may be more beneficial to give a short presentation of yourself rather than trying to collaborate with your students on classroom policies.

Rapport-building Strategies

In the first few days of the semester set aside some time to begin connecting with your students. After all, McKeachie (2002) reminds us that students “come to the first class wanting to know...what kind of person the teacher is.” Thus, getting off to a solid start with your rapport helps set the tone for the semester, makes a good impression of you, and can give the students a degree of ownership over the course. Here are some suggestions:

- ✓ **Exercise Self-Disclosure** Consider sharing some things about your life with your students. For example, give a brief presentation on your background, interest in the field, summer vacation, family, hobbies etc. Leslie Wooten-Blanks (2012) suggests that instructors share some details about their experiences and difficulties they faced as undergraduates. By doing so, an instructor is demonstrating that he or she “is a human. Not a robot” (Wooten-Blanks 2012).
- ✓ **Learn Students’ Names** Even though it may be somewhat challenging, consider memorizing students’ names because it will allow you to call on them during classroom proceedings. Additionally, by using students’ names you’ll be acknowledging them as individuals which can be important considering that he or she is among hundreds, if not thousands, of others on campus (Gillespie 1997).

Online Resources for Learning Students' Names

What are some effective ways to learning students' names quickly and accurately? Both of the following articles offer a myriad of suggestions:

- "Learning Students' Names" from The University of Nebraska-Lincoln Office of Graduate Studies: <http://www.unl.edu/gradstudies/current/teaching/names>
- "Not Quite 101 Ways to Learning Students' Names" from the University of Virginia Teaching Resource Center: <http://trc.virginia.edu/teaching-tips/not-quite-101-ways-to-learning-students-names/>

How can I learn students' names in a large class? There are various ways to begin learning students' names in classes with large enrollment such as utilizing name tents or seating charts. The University of North Carolina's Center for Faculty Excellence offers some suggestions: <http://cfe.unc.edu/publications/fyc1.html>

- ✓ **Communicate and Collaborate on Policies** Be specific and transparent when communicating your policies to your students. By exercising clarity on the syllabus, student requirements, classroom protocol etc., you are defining the parameters of the working relationship. If possible, consider allowing the students to have some input on certain aspects of the course. For example, allow them to decide on a few specific topics they really want to explore or vote on certain due dates (i.e. whether term papers should be due on a Friday or a Monday).
- ✓ **Become Acquainted with Your Students** Whether it is through introductions or an ice-breaker activity (many of which can be found through a simple Google search), gain a better understanding of who is actually seated on the other side of the podium. Or, Neil Fleming (2003) recommends gathering student information that can be relevant to the upcoming semester. By giving the students an "Expectation Quiz" (<http://www.theideacenter.org/research-and-papers/idea-papers/idea-paper-no-39>), the instructor can learn more about students' interest and prior knowledge of the material, learning preferences, and study habits.

Rapport-Maintaining Strategies

After establishing initial rapport with your students in the early days of the semester, consider that there are a myriad of ways in which to sustain it over the coming months. Here are some suggestions:

- ✓ **Be Accessible** Barbara Harrell Carson (1996) found that accessibility to be "the single most frequently cited evidence of a professor's caring." Thus, making yourself available

to your students can really drive the relationship forward. Consider arriving a little early and staying after class in order to give your students the opportunity to chat with you (Gillespie 1997). Additionally, keep in touch with your students via email; send out class reminders, respond to their requests within a reasonable time period, and “check-in” with those who may be having difficulties. Finally, be sure to invite your students to come to your office hours on a weekly basis.

- ✓ **Start Every Class Meeting off on the Right Foot** Prior to launching into your daily lesson, take a few moments to set the tone for the class meeting. Begin each class with a “warm greeting, a comment about something topical and relevant to student’s lives, or a reference to a common experience” (Morss 2005). By spending a few minutes to welcome and reconnect with your students each day, it gives them the opportunity to settle in and begin focusing on the lesson in a relaxed way.
- ✓ **Emphasize Student-Centered Learning** Create learning opportunities in the classroom that are full of “lively exchanges.” For example, utilize classroom discussions that allow the students to “to think out answers for themselves.” Or, weave tangible and applicable examples from the students’ lives into the content (Carson, 1996). Ultimately, an emphasis on active-learning ensures that your students participate which can reinforce their sense of ownership of the class.
- ✓ **Gather Student Feedback** Consider gathering student feedback around the midway point of the semester. Invite your students to write responses to 3-4 questions related to their learning. For example, “What would you like to see more/less time spent on (in this class)?” or “How could I make my comments on your papers more helpful for you?” or “In what areas of the class are you still confused?” (Curzan 2006). Or, consider asking your students the same questions that we typically include in our student evaluations: 1) “What works well in this class?” 2) “What does not work well?” and 3) “What suggestions or recommendations do you have?” By giving the students an opportunity to provide some feedback, you are demonstrating that you truly care about their learning as well as gain a better idea of what improvements can be made.

Some Final Words on Classroom Rapport

I previously mentioned the phrase “personable yet professional.” Keep in mind the balance that this implies with your classroom rapport. Even though you strive to have great relationship with your students, remember that it is not a popularity contest. Similarly, consider having some boundaries or limitations in place. Anne Curzan and Lisa Damour (2006) note, “Students are not necessarily prepared to think of you both as a peer and as an authority figure; it is critical that you not compromise the latter in an effort to ‘connect’ with your students.” For example, mull over whether or not befriending students on Facebook or meeting them for coffee may come across as too informal. Additionally, remain aware that rapport can also lead to

favoritism or unfairness in the classroom (Fleming, 2003). In other words, an instructor who has a particularly strong connection with those students majoring in his or her same field may lose rapport with those who are non-majors.

Striving for a harmonious classroom experience is a very attainable goal. By building and maintaining a strong rapport with the students, the classroom can become a place in which motivation, learning, and camaraderie are mutual among instructors and students alike.

Additional Online Resources for Classroom Rapport

An instructor's communication skills can have a profound impact on classroom rapport. Visit this University of Nebraska-Lincoln website to learn some helpful verbal and non-verbal techniques to improve your relationship with your students:

- <http://www.unl.edu/gtahandbook/building-rapport>

Similarly, an instructor's behavioral habits can influence classroom rapport. Michigan State University offers "The Seven Intolerable Categories of Teaching Behavior – MSU Teaching Thoughts #22" to help instructors build their awareness of the little things that may be damaging their connection with students:

- <http://tap.msu.edu/teachingthoughts/docs/TT2011.pdf>

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