

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 each other. Students would participate without reticence, and instructors would guide young minds to new intellectual discoveries. In a less than ideal world, students want proof that the professor will treat them fairly. They may not even want to be in this particular class, it being a requirement within their major or degree program. We as instructors may ask questions and get no response. No one may want to speak up. We may have office hours without any visitors. Despite our best intentions, we may find ourselves at an impasse. One way to characterize this situation is a lack of *rapport* with our class.

If you check the dictionary, rapport is defined as “*an especially harmonious or sympathetic connection.*” Yet, how do we go about forming this kind of connection? Why does it matter, and what benefits might it have to offer? This paper will address these questions, while attempting to clear up a few possible misconceptions about rapport. Finally, while it may be easy to articulate both positive and negative extremes, navigating the line between professionalism and friendliness can be difficult for teachers. Especially with younger, possibly less experienced teachers (who may be closer in age to their students), finding the right balance is especially important to set the tone for a positive learning environment.

While the dictionary has one definition for rapport, other scholars and educators have found their own ways to explain the concept of rapport. In his book, *The Skillful Teacher*, Stephen Brookfield (1990) defines rapport as “the affective glue that binds education relationships together” (p. 163). Richard Tiberius (1993) is similarly effusive, conceiving of rapport as the context in which teaching and learning take place. Both authors articulate the idea that rapport sets the stage for learning outcomes, and it can encourage participation. Feeling safe in the classroom can help students take more of the risks needed to engage in higher levels of learning and thinking, all the while knowing that we 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 clearly 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. To paraphrase Aristotle, rapport is a habit and not an act. On the other hand, student-teacher rapport is distinct in that “a number of conditions conducive to mutually satisfactory, fulfilling social relationships are absent or only marginally present in the college setting” (Walsh and Maffei, 1994). For example, the instructor is charged with classroom management, gives grades, and is ultimately responsible for guidance and feedback. This balance between relationship and responsibility can be a fine line, and it is worth examining a few gray areas that relate to rapport.

The language of rapport emphasizes relationship and caring in our teaching, but it can also be useful to set healthy boundaries that allow rapport to develop appropriately. While we may be mentors for our students, good rapport does not require us to be on-call therapists for our students. We can have personal space, and there are professional services on most campuses to deal with honest psychological concerns (and you may refer if you deem it necessary). Secondly, while there is a place for humor in any classroom, our primary goal is not to entertain. Good rapport does not require us to change our personalities for the sake of a laugh, and this can be counterproductive as it may risk respect. Finally, while rapport may be foundational, it is not a substitute for other effective teaching strategies. Disorganization, unclear explanations, and/or a lack of clear and prompt feedback can damage your students' respect for you and, by extension, your rapport with them.

II. Why is rapport important?

Before we invest our energies into developing better relationships with our classes, it is not unreasonable to ask why the relationship with our students is so important in the first place. How might rapport help facilitate student learning? Once again, Richard Tiberius (1993) has an answer that gets to the root of the issue: "The reason that we often fail to appreciate the importance of relationships is that we have inherited misconceptions about teaching, about learning, and about the nature of the mind" (Tiberius, 1993, p. 2). These misconceptions include seeing the mind as something to be filled by knowledge, put there by a professor. Tiberius follows up on these misconceptions: "the mind is no more a computer than it is a mechanical device... indeed, it is not a thing on which we can work" (p. 2).

If the mind is not a machine (even a sophisticated one, like a computer), then how does learning take place in the classroom? A sufficient answer to this question is beyond the scope of this paper, but we can draw a few conclusions that relate to developing rapport in teaching. For one, students have previous knowledge and ways of seeing the world: "students do not come with an empty mental slate; they have existing frameworks waiting to attach new knowledge" (Fleming, 2003, p. 3). We are not working with a passive information receptacle, but a mind that is still growing (Tiberius, 1993). Moreover, these minds belong to students with interests, knowledge, and beliefs. Thus, "we need to think of our job not as teaching art, biology, English, history, math, psychology and so on but teaching *students*" (Nilson, 2010, p. 3). The more we can discover about what our students know, the more we can meet them where they are with material that speaks to their interests (Tiberius, 1993).

Finally, if teaching is interactive, then it makes good sense to develop a positive quality in those relationships. But, what benefits might rapport yield that might not otherwise occur? The simplest answer is that rapport can yield trust between students and instructor. In the absence of basic trust, the instructor may not seem approachable. In spite of attempts to be accessible (inviting students to office hours, asking them how they are), students may not take him/her up on the offer. Within the class itself, Stephen Brookfield makes a case that rapport can build trust to benefit students learning behaviors. Without it, students may be "unwilling to submit themselves to the perilous uncertainties of new

learning. They avoid risk. They keep their most deeply felt concerns themselves” (Brookfield, 1990, p. 163). If we value deep learning, rapport and trust may help students engage in class more fully. At its core, good rapport can be viewed as an issue of job satisfaction: “Most college teachers enjoy classes more when they have good personal relationships with their students, and the satisfaction (in turn) has a beneficial effect on the quality of their instruction” (Walsh & Maffei, 1994).

III. How do we develop rapport with our students?

So, how exactly do we develop rapport with our students? What follows is a list of concrete strategies and points to consider that can build rapport. No matter what you do, it is important to remember Buskist and Saville’s (2001) conclusion on rapport: “any one of these actions alone is unlikely to build rapport. Instead, combinations of these behaviors implemented consistently over time provide the synergistic effects necessary for rapport to *emerge* in your teaching” (p. 1) Thus, consistency is as important as the specific behaviors. Timing is also an important issue. 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). Do not underestimate first impressions!

Practically speaking, you may want to consider the following tips:

- **Use the whole first day!** 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!** There are a number of ways to go about this, from simple (Palmer, n.d.) to complex (Jaworsky, n.d.), but this fundamental gesture can communicate a fundamental level of concern for your students as people. 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 from the University ID office, while some universities integrate this information into their Blackboard sites.
 - You can ask students to 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 students to discuss, have them discuss something on the first day (Nilson, 2010).

IV. 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 on 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 (albeit 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 capable of a great deal of fun. 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 Quiz** – 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.
- **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.

Though many of these strategies may be made slower or infeasible by 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 class 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 bit about yourself. Another principle to keep in mind is that people should only share what they feel comfortable sharing. Probing, however well-intentioned, may have the opposite effect of making the student(s) feel like their space is being invaded. Mutual respect and disclosure are two sides of the same coin that is reciprocity.

V. Letting your students know you

Teachers have the challenge of establishing both their authority and their flexibility, each without compromising the other (Brookfield, 1990). In addition to laying out the essential details of your syllabus (which, when organized and clear, builds rapport by communicating clear boundaries to your students), you have an opportunity to introduce your course, your subject matter, 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?
- **What do you love about what you study and what you teach?** Keep in mind, enthusiasm is contagious, as is a lack thereof. Reflecting on what excites you about your field/subject can give you material, but experiencing that excitement can change how you come across to your students. Consciously or not, they are looking for cues to tune in or check out.
- **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 useful, as your students may relate more directly to you as a student).

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. Overall, though, letting your students know who you are may make you seem a bit more approachable and accessible.

VI. How do I maintain rapport throughout the semester?

In spite of plenty of recommendations about building rapport early in the semester, if not the first day, rapport also requires maintenance. In class, this entails many things that are a part of responsible teaching:

- **Utilize your office hours!** Time and class size allowing, consider meeting with your students individually throughout the first few weeks. Mind your office hours for accessibility; Nilson (2010) recommends finding a time that straddles class periods to cast your net as widely as

possibly. You may even consider moving your office hours to a more neutral location, like a public study area (library, student union, etc.).

- **Be approachable/accessible:** Arriving early and staying a few minutes after class to answer students question, or even just to chat, can give students who have questions an immediate outlet. 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 'other lives:'** Not only do your students have other classes, but many of them have other jobs, social lives, 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 seemingly banal question like: "How about that football game?" 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 and contribute to or even damage rapport. While we as teachers are not required to provide reasons for every grading decision, providing adequate reasoning can help students see what standard we used to assess their work (rather than seeing the grade as an assessment of their abilities), and we may even offer suggestions/examples of how to improve.
- **Ask for feedback!** Formally or informally, giving students a voice can improve your relationship with students. Be it a mid-semester or end-of-semester evaluation or asking your students what suggestions they have in a class discussion, be honest with your students that you want to improve and you want their help to make this class a better learning experience for everyone.

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?**
- ✓ **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 subject and our students?**

While appropriate teaching strategies, well-prepared materials, and a mastery of our subject are all part of this, small, simple acts that characterize good relationships in any arena can pay dividends in shaping a healthy, 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.

VII. Considerations/Conclusion

In the end, we find ourselves with a question of balance: “Where do I draw the line between a relationship that promotes or hinders motivation and learning...” (Aultman et al., 2009, p. 637). How do we develop more reciprocal relationships while maintaining respect of the distinct roles of teacher and student? Experience plays a role, according to Aultman et al. (2009):

Experienced teachers tended to change their approaches to developing involvement and changed the parameters of various interaction boundaries as they gained confidence in their teaching role. The confidence gained through experience allowed them to more easily make decisions in this complicated negotiation process and develop their own balance between a sense of professionalism and a useful level of involvement (p. 645).

At their best, teacher-student relationships can be “trustful... involve a minimum of control, are cooperative, and are conducted in a reciprocal, interactive manner” (Tiberius and Billson, 1991, p. 82).

This idea of balance is paramount as we walk this line. Going too far one way or the other can have unintended consequences. Attempting total control with no exceptions can squelch your students’ willingness to participate, but being flexible can damage students’ trust as well. You as the instructor sacrifice some integrity if you go back on your own rules (Walsh & Maffei, 1994). In addition, being flexible on a case-by-case basis may open you to charges of favoritism (and rightly so), which can undermine trust and rapport as well. Favoritism can also extend to so-called relating with your students outside of class. Remember, being friendly is not the same thing as being friends. More practically, consider a moratorium on social media connections with your students. Keep in mind, “setting out to win students’ approval is as dangerous as ignoring them” (Fleming, 2003, p. 7) **Be yourself, but don’t try too hard.**

Your students are neither your colleagues nor your inferiors, they are your students. They occupy a space where you can shape the learning environment with both structure and humanity. Your students can become co-investigators (and even co-teachers in some cases), but this requires your guidance and input in the first place. As a foundation, you need students to buy into the merits of the class as well as your merits and authenticity as an instructor. This may not seem fair, but “students’ past interactions with faculty may require the teacher to take the first step toward mutuality...” and continue to lead the way until the student feels secure enough to participate (Tiberius, 1993, p. 5). Here, we come to a healthy conclusion for rapport. It exists to make the learning environment a positive one, and there are ancillary benefits as well. We may be more effective, and we may even enjoy our jobs a bit more.

Sources (with Online Resources where available):

Aultman, L. P., Williams-Johnson, M. R., & Schutz, P. A. (2009). Boundary dilemmas in teacher–student relationships: Struggling with “the line”. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 25(5), 636-646.

Brookfield, S. D. (1990). *The skillful teacher: On technique, trust, and responsiveness in the classroom*. John Wiley & Sons.

Buskist, W., & Saville, B. K. (2001). Creating positive emotional contexts for enhancing teaching and learning. *APS Observer*, 12-13.

Fleming, N. (2003). Establishing rapport: Personal interaction and learning, *IDEA Paper No. 39*. Retrieved July 20, 2012, from <http://www.theideacenter.org/research-and-papers/idea-papers/idea-paper-no-39>

Jaworsky, M. (n.d.). New students, new semester: how to remember names and faces. *Honolulu Community College*. Retrieved February 10, 2012, from <http://www2.honolulu.hawaii.edu/facdev/guidebk/teachtip/remnames.htm>

Palmer, M. (n.d.). Not quite 101 ways to learning students’ names. *University of Virginia Teaching Resource Center*. Retrieved June 28, 2012, from http://trc.virginia.edu/Publications/Teaching_Concerns/Misc_Tips/Learn_Names.htm

This is more of a potpourri of suggestions for building student-teacher rapport, and it can be a useful way to diversify your approaches to getting to know your students.

Tiberius, R. (1993). The why of teacher/student relationships. *Essays on Teaching Excellence – Professional & Organizational Development Network*, 5(8). Retrieved July 20, 2012, from <http://www.podnetwork.org/publications/teachingexcellence/93-94/V5,%20N8%20Tiberius.pdf>

Wooten-Blanks, L. (2012). Building rapport with students by sharing a piece of yourself. *Effective Teaching Strategies for the College Classroom | Faculty Focus*. Retrieved July 20, 2012 from <http://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/effective-teaching-strategies/building- rapport-with-students-by-sharing-a-piece-of-yourself/>

Leslie Wooten-Banks describes the effects of sharing her personal history with her class. Overall, she makes a case for allowing your students to understand who you are.