

Classroom Success Through Rapport-Building

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“Trust between teachers and students is the affective glue that binds educational relationships together. Not trusting teachers has several consequences for students. They are unwilling to submit themselves to the perilous uncertainties of new learning. They avoid risk. They keep their most deeply felt concerns private. They view with cynical reserve the exhortations and instructions of teachers.”

- Stephen Brookfield (2006)

If this trust between teachers and students is so crucial, how does a teacher accomplish building this dynamic within a new classroom? Furthermore, how does the teacher foster a warm, positive environment where students are motivated to attend class, participate in discussion, and, ultimately, learn? The answer is rapport.

While teaching journals and manuals have a surfeit of guidance on facilitating discussion, integrating technology, and obtaining student feedback, one area of emphasis that is surprisingly lacking is the development of rapport between teacher and student. This is because rapport is tricky to fully understand. Perhaps that is why the voluminous literature on college and university teaching essentially ignores it. Rapport has been avoided in favor of other, more important variables which can be more readily conceptualized and manipulated. Nonetheless, it is worth considering the role of rapport if for no other reason than its contributions to effective teaching (Buskist & Saville, 2001).

Lowman describes college classrooms as rich laboratories of interpersonal psychology (Lowman, 1995) with both students and teachers alike entering class with certain fears that can be alleviated from rapport building. Teachers generally fear not “getting through” to their students and failing to properly provide the educational material while students typically fear that the instructor will be authoritarian and that they will fail to perform (Lowman, 1995).

Rapport must be studied by aspiring educators. It must be given more than just the perfunctory nod that most teaching literature provides. The purpose of this literature review is to

analyze the importance of rapport within the classroom and provide several methods for maximizing instructor-student rapport.

RAPPORT IS IMPORTANT

Rapport is defined as an overall feeling between two people encompassing a mutual, trusting, and prosocial bond (Catt, Miller, & Schallenkamp, 2007). Although students report that rapport is an essential characteristic of a teacher, relatively little is known about this key facet of teaching (Frisby & Martin, 2010). Teachers hear of its importance, but how can rapport be taught, measured, and further developed?

The rapport between instructor and student can be a significant factor in the overall learning and success of individual students. Rapport is one term that is truly relationship-centered in capturing what is experienced in an interpersonal relationship (Jorgenson, 1992) and Coupland (2003) argues that building rapport can have positive effects on the classroom environment. It can minimize anxiety, increase student participation, structure and encourage social interaction, foster a positive learning environment, and increase learning. (Frisby & Martin, 2010).

Rapport improves numerous classroom areas; specifically motivation, feedback, student learning, communication, and, not to be ignored, instructor well-being. Wasley states that students who interact frequently with an instructor earn higher grades, are more satisfied, and are more likely to return to school in subsequent years (Wasley, 2006). This positive classroom environment starts by developing relationships with individual students. Moreover, for the benefit of teachers out there, Middlebury's Barbara Hofer argues that a classroom of motivated learners will actually affect [the teacher's] motivation and can make teaching a more satisfying experience for the instructor (McKeachie, 2011). So for your own health, and for the overall student learning, increasing rapport can yield large dividends.

RAPPORT IS PUT TO THE TEST

Before reviewing specific rapport-building practices, let's take a closer look at a recent study conducted by Brandi Frisby and Matthew Martin that evaluated the importance of instructor-student rapport. The purpose of their study was to develop a deeper understanding of how interpersonal relationships in the classroom impacted learning. The study involved 233

students from across an undergraduate pool at an American university. Of the 233 participants ranging in age from 19-29 (M=20.48), 125 were men, 108 were woman and they were all a mix between freshman and seniors. The study analyzed several hypotheses such as the impacts of perceived instructor rapport on the classroom environment, classroom participation, and if there is a positive relationship between rapport and learning.

The study's results indicated that perceived rapport with instructors is positively related to classroom connectedness, participation, and overall student learning. Frisby and Martin found that instructor rapport enhanced almost all facets within the classroom (Frisby & Martin, 2010). The results support their hypothesis that perceived classroom rapport is positively correlated with an improved learning environment. These results bolster the argument that students enter a classroom with a need for instructors to like them and that instructor-student rapport is an ever-vital aspect of student success (Frisby & Martin, 2010).

Frisby and Martin contend that these results place significant responsibility for the classroom environment on instructors. With results like this, it begs the question, why is rapport not an essential component of teacher pedagogy? If student participation, classroom environment, and learning are all results of a positive instructor-student rapport, should this not be further emphasized?

Instructors contribute to creating this positive classroom environment for their students. This occurs through the integration of collaborative opportunities, providing intellectual excitement, engaging in casual and personal communication, and fostering these positive relationships (Johnson (2009). With the mounting evidence concerning the impact of the instructor, it is necessary to have instructors in place that best exhibit the traits that lead to rapport building in the classroom. With this in mind, let's examine methods to improve teacher-student rapport.

METHODS TO IMPROVE INSTRUCTOR-STUDENT RAPPORT

“The ability to stimulate strong positive emotions in students separates the competent from the outstanding college teacher”

- Joseph Lowman (1995)

Okay, so rapport is important to student success. Now what? What does a new teacher need to think about in order to grow rapport with their students? There are a plethora of factors that can contribute, but let's focus on several that will get new teachers off to a running start. First, a teacher must know their students – good teachers will know all of their student's names while great teachers will tell you what position they play on the varsity team or what instrument they play in the band. Rapport is also developed through engaging your students – not only through subject-based lectures, but on all levels to include casual conversation. Additionally, teachers must establish and maintain open and friendly lines of communication with their students – whether it is through email or out-of-class additional instruction. No matter what, a teacher must understand that every time they interact with their students, they are making history – they are setting an example for the individual student and leaving an impression, whether good or bad.

Know Your Students

It's time to get to know your students. Nothing so impresses students as a college teacher who makes serious effort to get to know their students as individuals (Lowman, 1995). This “first impression” should occur long before you provide your lesson-one introduction. A smart choice is to start your open lines of communication early by sending a welcome email to your students with some general information, along with the course syllabus, several days prior to the first class. Already your students have some initial fears assuaged through this easy communication.

The first day with your students is an important event to get the relationship off to a running start. Remember – you are making a big impression and having your own homework is especially important prior to class. Your own homework involves learning your students' names and some general background information. The easiest way to begin forming a relationship with your students is to learn their names (Duffy & Jones, 1995).

Prior to the first class, spend an adequate amount of time reviewing your class roster with each student's respective picture. In an hour or so you can have a roster with as many as 50 to 75 students memorized. Learning names is the most important single thing a college teacher can do

to communicate to students that he or she values them as individuals (Lowman, 1995). Do not stop here. Find out which students play varsity sports, which participate in the performing arts, which have exotic majors, and who is from your hometown or home state. Believe it or not, your knowledge of your students will shock them during the routine first day introductions, “What Jimmy failed to mention is that he made the All-Conference Team last season” or “Kim, I hear that your acapella group is performing at the student center soon”. The look on their faces will tell you immediately that your homework paid off. Now, the point of this preparation is not to amaze your students, but to demonstrate that you have a genuine care of who they are and what they do. If the teacher cares this much to know about the student, the least the student will do is finish their homework, show up on time, and participate in class. Class motivation levels are at an all-time high.

Now that you know about your students, ensure they know about you. Being a mysterious, sweater-wearing member of academia might be your objective, but by providing some of your own personal information (hometown, years at current school, college major, interests, hobbies, so on), you are humanizing yourself in their eyes and opening up further lines of communication.

Engage Your Students

Take every opportunity to engage your students – both within the realm of instruction and on more quotidian matters. Lowman suggests arriving to class five to ten minutes early. This allows time to chat informally with your students or for them to approach you about their concerns (Lowman, 1995). These casual conversations are another opportunity to demonstrate that you care for your students and value them as people – yet another way to garner rapport. Take advantage of opportunities outside of class to further develop the relationship with your students. Truly, anything you can do to show interest in students as individuals will help to promote rapport (Lowman, 1995). These outside-the-class interactions can occur anywhere: providing additional instruction in your office, over email communication, even attending your students own athletic or artistic events.

When it comes to holding office hours for additional instruction, it is imperative to keep your word on when you will be present. Barbara Harrell Carson found teacher accessibility to be the single most frequently cited evidence of a professor’s caring (Carson, 2000). It is not enough

just being present during your office hours. When a student drops by a professor's office, it is rarely a casual action for the student (Lowman, 1995). The reaction, both verbal and non-verbal, that the instructor exhibits in these out-of-class exchanges can greatly affect that confidence and motivation of the individual student. While some instructors may appear annoyed or bothered that a student has "interrupted" their office time, a proper response can be found with common sense. Perhaps the student already has a bit of anxiety and the instructor can do best by immediately de-emphasizing the teacher-student status difference. Make the student feel welcome through a positive attitude, good eye contact, and a comfortable atmosphere. Treat the student in your office with the same courtesies you would provide to your own colleagues.

Go Further

Anything you can do to show interest in your students as individuals helps to build rapport (Lowman, 1995). Go attend the sporting event where your students are participating; go see performing arts in the community that involves your students; mention that you read their name in the college or local newspaper. Congratulate your students for successes outside your classroom. Again, this demonstrates that you care and that you are interested in them as people. Now, this only works if you exhibit a real and genuine interest in your students. Superficiality need not apply here.

Remember that every time you interact with your students, you are making history. Teachers are always making an impression on their students – whether lecturing, having a casual conversation, or providing additional instruction in the office, or seeing them off campus.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Want more methods to build rapport within your classroom? William Buskist and Bryan K. Saville conducted extensive research on this topic and recommend the following suggestions for developing rapport with your students:

- Learn to call your students by name.
- Learn something about your students' interests, hobbies, and aspirations.
- Create and use personally relevant class examples.
- Arrive to class early and stay late -- and chat with your students.
- Explain your course policies -- and why they are what they are.
- Post and keep office hours.

- Get online -- use e-mail to increase accessibility to your students.
- Interact more, lecture less -- emphasize active learning.
- Reward student comments and questions with verbal praise;
- Be enthusiastic about teaching and passionate about your subject matter.
- Lighten up -- crack a joke now and then.
- Be humble and, when appropriate, self-deprecating.
- Make eye contact with each student -- without staring, glaring, or flaring.
- Be respectful.
- Don't forget to smile!

How will you know when rapport is built? The easiest determining factor is the behavior of your students toward you as the teacher (Buskist & Saville, 2001). If your students participate in class, ask questions, approach you in and outside of class, or seek advice you can be sure that you are well on your way to developing the rapport that many teachers strive for.

There are abundant opportunities to build your relationship with your students both in and outside the classroom. Rapport is not just built overnight; it must be cultivated from prior to the first class all the way to the last lesson – and even after. Take advantage of every email, every conversation, and every interaction to develop your teacher-student rapport. These actions, as small as they may seem, will result in huge successes in terms of your student's motivation, participation, and overall learning.

ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY:

Brookfield, S. D. (2006) *The skillful teacher*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Brookfield offers tools and inspiration that teachers can add to their own inventory. His insights and suggestions for college educators are innovative and perceptive. Through his clear agenda and lack of jargon, the author provides a refreshing view at teaching and the vital relationships between teacher and student. Add this superb book to any teacher's reading list.

Buskist, W. & Saville, B. (2001) "Rapport-Building: Creative Positive Emotional Contexts for Enhancing Teaching and Learning", *APS Observer*. Available on-line at:

http://www.psychologicalscience.org/teaching/tips/tips_0301.html

These Auburn University professors have synthesized a number of colleague's works into their pithy argument on creating a positive classroom environment through building rapport with their students. Taking the approach of answering a fellow teacher's concerns on feeling uncomfortable in the classroom, the authors explain the necessity of rapport and how this essential characteristic can yield huge dividends. After a thorough explanation of what rapport is and its importance, the authors tie everything together by providing a list of rapport-building tips for their audience.

These fifteen tenets should be tacked to every teacher's bulletin board as a compass check for their classroom instruction.

Frisby, Brandi & Martin, Matthew (2010) "Instructor–Student and Student–Student Rapport in the Classroom", *Communication Education*. Available on-line at:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rced20>

Frisby and Martin examined the relationships between teachers and their students to determine their roles in the learning environment. The concise paper goes right to work demonstrating the positive correlation between rapport and student success. The authors examined 233 students and reported their classroom perceptions. The results speak for themselves – in all categories examined, the authors determined that rapport was the essential key that lead to improved participation, motivation, and learning.

Jorgenson, J. (1992). Social Approaches: Communication, rapport, and the interview: A social perspective. *Communication Theory*, 2, 148-156.

Lescher ,Troy (2010). "How Can I Build and Maintain Classroom Rapport?," *Teaching, Learning, and Professional Development Center* , Texas Tech University. Retrieved from: <http://www.tlpd.ttu.edu/home/TLPDCTeachingResources/documents/Rapport%20White%20paper.pdf>

This white paper on building classroom rapport brings together numerous other works on the subject into a succinct explanation to the question, how can I build rapport within the classroom? Lescher argues that rapport is imperative within the college classroom and offers various strategies to assist building rapport in your own classroom. These rapport building strategies are simple and right on-point for any teacher to follow. Lescher goes a step further and provides numerous online resources that help the reader explore additional approaches for rapport-building.

Lowman, J. (1995) *Mastering the techniques of teaching* (2nd Ed.). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass. Joseph Lowman presents a non-idealistic method for successful teaching in the classroom. This book is the ultimate tool for new teachers to develop their craft. Within this masterpiece, Lowman provides a new learning model that examines six sources of influence on how students learn. This superb work is a "must-read" for all teachers and is presented in an easy-to-follow format.

McKeachie, W. J. (2011). *McKeachie's teaching tips: Strategies, research, and theory for college and university teachers* (13th ed.). Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Cengage Learning. If this is the only book on teaching that a young teacher reads, they will be prepared for the classroom. The author's work is clear and to the point. This phenomenal teacher "smartbook" provides recipes for success in the classroom. The strategies that McKeachie and his crew of professional university instructors present arm teachers with the tools they need for success in the classroom. This guide should be mandatory reading for all young college instructors.

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