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On Rapport: Connecting with Students

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Teachers and scholars have long advocated for the importance of building relationships with students. In fact, the powerful relationships between instructors and students have been highlighted as early as the time of Aristotle, who has been described not only as a teacher but also as a guide, mentor, and protector.¹ I began my research on instructor rapport—the perception of this special relationship—much later, in 2010, so I won't go as far as saying that this is groundbreaking. However, I *will* make this claim: building rapport with students is more important than ever in our current social, political, and educational landscape.

Enrollments are increasing and budgets are decreasing. Incivilities and distractions are abundant. Students and instructors alike are negotiating helicopter parenting, a consumer mindset, entitlement, and grade inflation. Students, more than ever before, experience declining resilience and report higher-than-ever levels of stress, anxiety, and mental illnesses. Universities continue to struggle with persistence, retention, and graduation rates, as well as the more pressing issues of safety, free speech, inclusivity, and equity. These issues affect all students and faculty, across all disciplines, and across all course delivery formats.

This snapshot of higher education may seem dire, but it underscores the need for a return to basic humanity and personal connection between students and teachers. *Rapport* is defined as a mutual, trusting, respectful, enjoyable, and positive connection between instructors and students. Faranda and Clarke have identified rapport as an essential characteristic of a teacher (273) and high-rapport instructors have been described as “encouraging, open-minded...creative, interesting, accessible, happy, having a ‘good’ personality, promoting class discussion, approachab[le]...concern[ed] for students, and fair” (Benson, Cohen, and Buskist 238).

Rapport is critical to both student and instructor success.² From a student perspective, rapport has been associated with academic motivation, affect/attitude toward courses and instructors, reduced anxiety, greater participation and engagement, learning outcomes, likelihood to use student services (e.g., tutoring, counseling), and persistence to graduation. Some of these positive perceptions for students are long-lasting. Barbara Carson, for example, found in reflections from Rollins College alumni that the most impactful and memorable aspect of their education, even 30 years after graduating, was a caring instructor (14). From an instructor’s perspective, rapport allows a more connected and engaged classroom environment with decreased burnout, greater teaching satisfaction, and greater institutional commitment. But how can instructors actually build rapport, given the challenges of class format, size, and disciplinary differences? There is no one-size-fits-all approach, but instructors can choose from a variety of strategies to build rapport.

The most impactful and memorable aspect of their education, even 30 years after graduating, was a caring instructor.

First, building rapport starts early, even before a class begins. Angela Legg and Janie Wilson found that a welcome email sent before the first class meeting built rapport, boosted student motivation and attitudes toward the course, and lasted over the course of the semester (209). This can be done in any course format, size, and discipline, and it offers instructors the opportunity to craft and present their *ethos* with intention and in a controlled textual environment. And, the first day of class matters just as much. William Lammers, Arthur Gillasp, and Felecia Hancock found that building rapport on the first day of class was a significant predictor of student learning at the middle and end

of the semester (149). Beyond covering policy and boilerplate, how might the first class meeting use thoughtful activities to introduce students to the instructor, each other, the course, and the field?

Second, once classes do begin, be strategic about interactions before and after class. Don't breeze into the classroom and start teaching immediately. Show up a few minutes early (just a few!), stay a few minutes after class, and talk to the students one-on-one to get to know them. These interactions do not have to be related to the course; out-of-class interactions such as office hours and email are also predictive of positive student psychological and emotional affect toward courses, instructors, and learning (Goldman, Goodboy, and Bolkan 486). These sorts of strategies build perceptions that instructors are approachable and care about student well-being. Even in large lecture courses where it's challenging to get to know all of the students, just getting to know *some* has positive effects for

students sitting in the surrounding area, like a domino effect. As much as rapport builds connections with particular students, it's also a behavior that is observed by others and influences *their* opinions about the instructor, the course, and the educational enterprise.

Building rapport between instructor and students also builds rapport between students and their peers.

Third, getting to know students beyond their academic performance allows an instructor to fine-tune their teaching and make learning more relevant for students. For instructors who emphasize content relevance, students report greater motivation to study (Frymier and Shulman 49), but *relevance* (understood loosely as alignment with students' past experiences and future goals) requires that instructors have a familiarity with students. Instructors can engage in appropriate self-disclosure and ask students questions about their lives. This reciprocal disclosure process is a rapport-building strategy that allows instructors to capitalize on the information gleaned from informal conversations before and after class, or, in another approach, surveys about student career goals, work situation, reasons for taking the class, and personal interests or hobbies. This is especially helpful in large lecture courses, where it may not be possible to interact personally and meaningfully with all students. It's a lot of information, but it can function more as a database that instructors consult strategically and selectively (for example, to prepare for one-on-one meetings).

Fourth, specific instructor behaviors can establish rapport. However simple they are, nonverbal immediacy behaviors (smiling, eye contact, moving around the classroom, removing barriers like a desk or podium from between instructors and the students) and verbal immediacy behaviors (learning student names, providing authentic verbal feedback during class) are empirically supported strategies. Moreover, and perhaps more importantly, building rapport between instructor and students also builds rapport between students and their peers. In large lecture courses, small groups facilitate greater discussions between instructor and peers (Lynch and Pappas 210) and enhance active learning (Ebert-May, Bewer, and Allred 606). Students' connections with peers, moreover,

show a strong association with *instructor* rapport, as students view instructors as the facilitators of those interactions (Frisby and Martin 146).

Finally, and especially for large lectures and online courses, instructors can make an effort to humanize themselves. Creating a self-introduction video of the instructor and posting it on the learning management system (LMS) can elicit greater perceptions of presence and rapport with students. And asking students to do the same likewise establishes rapport and connectedness. Presence can be established in many ways, from the traditional personalized feedback and discussion board responses to the more creative and adaptive such as virtual office hours and weekly podcast updates. Most LMSs allow for multimedia responses beyond the textual, and video/audio content not only manifests presence in a way that text abstracts, but it also is less time consuming for instructors when responding to a large collection of student work.

Ultimately, we know intuitively that rapport is important. However, we often struggle with *how* to establish rapport when faced with particular challenges. These strategies provide a starting point for negotiating unique contexts and challenges in an educational landscape that continues to change, vex, and encourage our efforts to promote student-centered learning. Like Aristotle, we must not only teach, but we must also guide, advise, and protect.

NOTES

1. See, for example, Kathleen Wright, "From the Odyssey to the University: What Is This Thing Called Mentoring?" *Association for Communication Administration Bulletin* no. 79, 1992, pp. 51-59.
2. For a full review of rapport as it applies to instructors and students, see Brandi Frisby and Marjorie Buckner, "Rapport in the Instructional Context," in *The Handbook of Instructional Communication*, edited by Marian Houser and Angela Hosek, Routledge, 2017, pp. 126-137.

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