

Rapport-Building: Creating Positive Emotional Contexts for Enhancing Teaching and Learning

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The ability to stimulate strong positive emotions in students separates the competent from the outstanding college teacher. (Lowman, 1995)

Like most of us who read *Teaching Tips columns*, Sara Jamison takes her teaching seriously. She looks forward to being in the classroom, although if truth be told, some days are better than others. She prepares well-organized lectures; experiments with new in-class activities; poses challenging questions on her exams; worries about her students' intellectual growth; and reads voraciously, trying to stay atop her courses. Sara seems to go all out in her attempt to be an effective teacher.

Nonetheless, she feels uncomfortable in class. Sometimes she senses a chasm between herself and her students. Her students respect her, but they are ambivalent about whether they would take another course from her. Many don't feel comfortable expressing their ideas in class and others feel disconnected from Sara and her subject matter.

Of course, Sara Jamison is fictitious. We created her to reflect those of us who, despite our best efforts to become more effective teachers, come up short. Sara represents an amalgamation of those qualities reflective of effective teaching, but which alone don't make our teaching truly outstanding. Such qualities may be necessary for effective teaching, but not sufficient. So-what is missing from Sara's teaching?

Sara's teaching seems to lack **rapport**, which the Random House Dictionary (1987) defines as "an especially harmonious or sympathetic connection" (p. 1601). Spanning the chasm between Sara and her students-or between any teacher and set of students-requires rapport-building: creating emotional connections between teacher and student and between student and subject matter. In this article, we reflect on the nature of rapport, offer simple suggestions for building rapport, and highlight some of the contributions that it brings to our teaching.

The Nature of Rapport and its Influence on Effective Teaching

Rapport is tricky to understand. Perhaps that is why the voluminous literature on college and university teaching essentially ignores it. Since rapport is more of a contextual variable that sets the stage for effective teaching, it has been avoided in favor of other variables, such as methods of teaching, modes of testing, and techniques of assessing teaching effectiveness, which can be more readily conceptualized and manipulated. Nonetheless, it is prudent to consider the role of rapport in our work if for no other reason than to explore its possible contributions to effective teaching.

RAPPORT AS AN EMERGENT PROPERTY

Establishing “an especially harmonious or sympathetic connection” with students is not likely the result of any single act. Rather, rapport is more likely the result of many things done consistently right. In this sense, rapport may be thought of as an emergent property of teaching, or, for that matter, any kind of social relationship. In general, we must do two things for rapport to develop. First, we must extend students a warm and friendly invitation to join the “community of learning” that we attempt to establish in our classrooms on the first day of class. Second, we must adopt this demeanor every day afterwards, in or out of class, and irrespective of the myriad problems that may develop over the course of the term.

Toward this end, Joseph Lowman argued that teachers must minimize the extent to which students experience negative emotions, such as anxiety and anger, and must attempt to create positive emotions in students such as self-efficacy and positive self-worth. This approach will help students feel that their teacher cares about them, encourage them to become motivated to do their best work, and think of their teacher in highly positive ways. The positive effects of rapport do not stop with students—they affect teachers as well. As Lowman noted in his 1995 book, *Mastering the Techniques of Teaching* “. . .most college teachers enjoy classes more when they have good personal relationships with their students, and this satisfaction has a beneficial effect on the quality of their instruction” (p. 98).

RAPPORT AS AN ALLIANCE BASED ON TRUST

Another way of conceptualizing rapport between teachers and students is to think of it in the same way many therapists view the “therapeutic alliance” between themselves and their clients. This alliance is marked by four elements: (i) the extent to which client and therapist agree on the goals of therapy, (ii) the client’s ability to work toward those goals, (iii) the therapist’s empathy toward the client and the therapist’s involvement in the therapeutic process, and (iv) the emotional connection between client and therapist and the client’s commitment to therapy (Gaston, 1990).

Mapping this model onto the teacher-student relationship, we might view rapport as follows: (i) the extent to which students accept or “buy into” the goals the teacher has spelled out to the class, (ii) the student’s ability to work toward these goals, (iii) the teacher’s ability to care genuinely for students and to nurture their learning, and (iv) the student and teacher “connecting” emotionally and students’ motivation to participate actively in their education. As such, rapport is both process and outcome. It is a process because it involves a series of steps a teacher takes that must occur for rapport to develop. It is an outcome because it emerges only when the appropriate components are present in teaching situations, leading to more effective teaching.

Central to this alliance between student and teacher is trust. Consider the point that Stephen Brookfield makes in his 1990 book, *The Skillful Teacher*:

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. (p. 162)

Clearly, trust is present in the alliance that forms between clients and effective therapists and between

students and effective teachers. Whether in therapy or in teaching, such trust contributes to building rapport, enhancing motivation, and stimulating learning. If we wish students to join us as members of the community of learning, we must demonstrate to our students that we can be trusted.

RAPPORT AS CONNECTEDNESS

Akin to the notion of alliance is Parker J. Palmer's concept of "connectedness." In *The Courage to Teach* (1998), he argued that good teachers strive to forge connections between themselves and their subject matter and between themselves and their students. Such connections are the result of the individual "identity and integrity" of the teacher as it is expressed through whatever medium the teacher uses to teach. In Palmer's words (1998):

. . .in every class I teach, my ability to connect with students, and to connect them with the subject, depends less on the methods I use than on the degree to which I know and trust my selfhood-and am willing to make it available and vulnerable in the service of learning. (p. 10)

Thus, teaching reveals our humanity, how we choose to define ourselves in our work, and the manner in which we relate to our subject matter, to our students, and to the larger world around us. If one wishes to "connect" with students-to establish rapport with them-one must expose at least part of one's self to one's students. To the extent that we are successful in this endeavor, we create an environment conducive to effective teaching, and by implication, effective learning.

RAPPORT UNVEILED

In our view, rapport is a positive emotional connection among students, teacher, and subject matter that emerges from the manner in which the teacher constructs the learning environment. Much of the framework is provided by the teacher's disposition toward students, the subject matter, the educational process, and, in general, life. To the extent that student and teacher unite to achieve course goals, the learning environment favors increased student receptivity to the teacher and subject matter. Central to the development of such an alliance is the teacher's sense of self, as reflected in such characteristics as trust and respect, and a willingness to involve students in the learning process.

STUDENT PERSPECTIVES ON RAPPORT

Attempting to understand rapport by placing it within this sort of conceptual scheme is only half the story, and perhaps the less important half at that. The other half, of course, is knowing how students experience rapport.

To gain a bit of insight into this matter, we surveyed several hundred Auburn University undergraduates enrolled in an introductory level psychology course and asked them to tell us three things: (i) the extent to which they have experienced rapport in their classes; (ii) the things that teachers do to develop rapport with them; and (iii) how rapport affects their academic behavior.

Only slightly more than half of the students reported that they had experienced rapport with a professor. These students told us that the most common teacher behaviors contributing to the development of

rapport were, in order: showing a sense of humor; availability before, after, or outside of class; encouraging class discussion; showing interest in them, knowing students' names; sharing personal insights and experiences with the class; relating course material in everyday terms and examples; and understanding that students occasionally have problems arise that inadvertently hinder their progress in their courses. Finally, the students also told us that the most common positive effects of rapport on their academic behavior were, in order: to increase their enjoyment of the teacher and subject matter; to motivate them to come to class more often, and to pay more attention in class. Thus, rapport seems to facilitate both student motivation for learning and their enjoyment of the course, and enhances student receptivity to what is being taught.

TIPS FOR RAPPORT-BUILDING

How might we build rapport with our students? Try any or all of 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 on line – 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.
- When all else fails, smile a lot – students will think you like them and your job.

Remember that any one of these actions alone is unlikely to build rapport. Instead, combinations of these behaviors implemented consistently over time produce the synergistic effects necessary for rapport to emerge in your teaching. How will you know when rapport is established? Probably the most reliable metric is the behavior of your students toward you. If they approach you with questions, comments, and personal remarks; smile or laugh during class; seek you out during your office hours, ask your advice about something; tell you that they liked a demonstration or lecture or that they are enjoying class, you can bet that you have developed some degree of rapport with your students.

SOME FINAL THOUGHTS

Matters often become especially clear when we look at them from an alternative perspective. In this case, we might consider the importance of rapport-building as creating a context for enhancing teaching and learning by contrasting it with one of its antitheses, alienation. The Random House Dictionary (1987) defines “alienate” as “to make indifferent or hostile” (p. 53). Thus, sure ways to alienate your students would be to do just the opposite of the suggestions given above for building rapport: don't

bother to learn your students' names; don't bother to learn anything about your students; don't bother to relate psychology to your students' lives; be late to class and rush out as soon as the period is over; don't explain your course policies; don't post your office hours, or better yet, post them, but don't keep them; make no attempt to enhance lines of communication with your students; assume your students are passive receptacles waiting to be filled with your intelligence; discourage students' questions and comments (if your students insist on speaking, ignore them, or even better, point out that their comments are lame); show students that psychology is boring and that you would rather do something other than teach; be stern, serious, and intolerant of lightheartedness; avoid eye contact, be arrogant, condescending, and narcissistic, and finally, scowl. If these don't work, then simply treat your students as if they are morons.

From this vantage, it is easy to see how rapport-building contributes to creating a context for establishing a positive emotional classroom atmosphere and helping students learn. After all, most students view their courses as much more than mere intellectual exercises. They often develop strong feelings about their courses and their teachers, which may be positive or negative, depending on whether those teachers take steps to build rapport or to alienate them. By not actively seeking to build rapport, we may unwittingly alienate our students.

The risk of unintentionally alienating students is particularly high in large classes—say those of 50 or more students. There seem to be just too many names, faces, and lives to get to know; thus, we might assume from the outset that building rapport in a class like this is impossible. *Au contraire!* Most of the “do's” listed above can be implemented easily regardless of class size. After all, behaviors such as making good eye contact, telling a joke or two, or exuding passion for one's subject matter is not constrained by how many students we have before us.

Lowman's (1995) point is on target—the classroom is an emotionally charged environment. Effective teaching involves tinkering with that environment so that we maximize the chances that students will learn from our courses. Rapport-building is one way to hedge our bets that we will be successful in this endeavor. Rapport may indeed be what is missing from Sara Jamison's otherwise exemplary teaching repertoire.