

Building Rapport: Moving Beyond Teacher Characteristics to Actions that Promote Learning

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4/19/2017



When it comes to connecting with students, good relationships and good rapport go hand in hand. The desired rapport develops when faculty are friendly, approachable, respectful, and caring toward students. And how do students respond to professors who've established good rapport? They "like" those professors, and that's the point at which some of us experience a bit of nervous twitching. If students like us, does that mean they learn more? Does education hinge on the popularity of the professor? The ethical ground feels stronger if what students learn and take from their educational experiences results from actions that support learning. And that circles us right back to rapport and the powerful role it plays in determining how students respond to the content in our courses, their daily attendance, and the study time they devote to what we're teaching. Student commitment to a course increases if rapport with the instructor is good. So, be nice, chat with students, and show that you love teaching.

If that still rankles, it probably should. Research on rapport shows that it's not just about teacher characteristics (Wilson and Ryan, 2013). Yes, they matter but so do student perceptions of their own involvement with the course and their feelings about it. Does the instructor encourage students' questions and welcome their comments? Does the instructor do things that make the course enjoyable? Do students like coming to class? Would students take more courses with the instructor? Answers to these questions are more about the climate for learning in a course than the personal characteristics of the instructor.

This research team started with a 34-item measure of professor-student rapport they had developed previously. (Note: the 34 items are worth reviewing and do appear in this follow-up study). Even though that instrument had high internal consistency, researchers describe it as "cumbersome." (p. 132) They worried about how often and carefully



it would be completed given the widespread use of course surveys. Their first task then was to see if they could reduce the number of items, which they found they could, but it's what else that emerged that makes this especially interesting research.

Most of the previous research on rapport concentrated on student perceptions of teacher characteristics. The importance of those characteristics was reconfirmed by this research. But what also emerged and proved to be even more powerful than those characteristics was that set of items related to students' involvement in and reactions to the course. They functioned as "the driving predictor" (p. 132) of significant student outcomes: attitudes, motivation, and several measures of learning, including grades. Unlike previous research, these were not the grades students predicted they would receive, they were the actual grades. "Perhaps professor-[student] rapport reflects more than just a caring, likable teacher; useful rapport tied to student outcomes seems to move beyond liking the teacher to what the teacher does to make the class more engaging for students." (pp. 132-133).

So, how we treat students is still important, but so is how we conduct the course. It's good to remind ourselves that both components can be communicated in a variety of ways. Sometimes quieter profs, those who are more introverted and less inclined to chat, feel that rapport involves actions inconsistent with who they are. That may be true, given how rapport is typically described, but there are a lot of different ways to build rapport. A bowl of candy next to the student chair in your office, an encouraging quotation posted on the course website before exams, an eye-catching photo on the screen as students arrive, stickers on the most improved papers—actions like these don't require words but still effectively communicate you care for students and engender positive feelings about the course.

I once took a course with a group of first-semester students and the professor did little to establish rapport with the class. He never learned most of the students' names, he never chatted, rarely smiled, didn't acknowledge students when he passed them on campus, and regularly berated our performance (in class, in the lab, and on exams). I was surprised by how much that compromised students' efforts to learn, how it side tracked their discussions and reinforced their expectations that they weren't going to like the content. Teachers can get in the way of learning or we can pave the way for learning.

Reference: Wilson, J. H., and Ryan, R. G., (2013). Professor-student rapport scale: Six items predict student outcomes. *Teaching of Psychology* 40 (2), 130-133.

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