

Connected Teaching: Building Rapport for Greater Learning

指導と学習の結合：より深い学びを目指した「ラポール」の構築

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Abstract: This review integrates research and theory to advocate for building rapport in the classroom. The primary purpose of this paper is to convince teachers of the necessity of building student-teacher rapport in order to meet the learning needs and learning preferences of students. The secondary purpose is to argue that part of our role as teachers is to create the affective conditions and positive emotions that engender the types of proacademic behaviors predictive of learning success. The final purpose is to offer practical solutions by presenting several low-risk high-yield behaviors that teachers can adopt to build rapport in the classroom.

Keywords: Rapport, affect, learning, immediacy, positive emotions

要旨: 本稿は、教室で学生とラポールを構築することの意義を主張するために、研究と理論を結び付ける試みである。その主目的は、学生と教員の間にラポールを構築し、学生のニーズや学習したい内容を知る必要性を教員側に確信させることである。第二の目的は、学習の成功をもたらす行動を学生に起こさせるため、前向きな感情と環境を創出することは、教員としての役割の一部であると主張することである。また、教員が教室で学生とラポールを築くために使用できる、低リスクかつ実りの多い行動を何例か紹介し、実用的な解決策を示すことも目的としている。

キーワード: ラポール、影響、学習、即時性、前向きな志気

1. Introduction

Several years ago, I was commuting home on the train when I was approached by one of my students, whom I have given the pseudonym Yuki. Yuki was a very shy and nervous young woman in her second year of college. She had taken two of my classes as a freshman and one as a sophomore, and in that time, I had gotten to know her quite well.

I first met Yuki during an ice-breaking activity at the start of the semester, something I often do to give students a chance to get to know their peers and to get to know me. I was walking around the classroom while the students spoke to each other when I noticed Yuki sitting awkwardly in the corner. I walked up to her, knelt down, said hello and introduced myself. I stuck out my hand for a handshake and waited. She didn't shake

my hand or speak, she just looked at me briefly before quickly turning away. I withdrew my hand and told her in a very calm voice that it was okay, that I was shy too, and I understood feeling nervous on the first day. I told her that she didn't have to talk if she didn't want to, and that it was very nice to meet her. Before standing, I asked her one more time what her name was. She looked at me, and in a nearly imperceptible voice filled with trepidation she told me her name. I smiled and told her it was nice to meet her, and I offered my hand again. She refused to shake my hand for the second time and looked down at the floor with shame in her eyes. I smiled and said, "It's okay. Maybe next time."

On the train that day over a year later, we said our hellos and exchanged small talk. I could tell Yuki was upset, and I asked her what was wrong. With a trembling voice and worry on her face she began to tell me about how lonely she was feeling. She said that she hadn't made any friends in school, that other students were mean to her, and that teachers would get angry because she wouldn't speak in class. She told me that she was thinking about dropping out of school, and that two nights ago she had considered committing suicide but when she thought of me, she couldn't do it. Hearing all this gave me a sinking feeling, and the train seemed to grow quiet. At first, I felt scared and burdened by the responsibility. I had no idea that she was in such a dark place. I listened to her as she told me that I was the only person that had been nice to her since starting college, and while I am sure that wasn't the case it was true to her, and that perception may have saved her life.

We will return to Yuki later, but for now I open with this story to illustrate the powerful effect that building connection with students can have on their lives. Yuki is just one example of the kinds of young people who enter our classrooms: nervous, afraid, insecure, uncertain, and vulnerable. They bring with them their previous learning experiences both positive and negative, each colored by the nuances of affect.

As teachers we all want to do our jobs better. Many of us have exerted a great deal of effort to get where we are in our careers and now spend a greater deal of time creating and reviewing lessons, organizing materials, attending meetings, and administering and grading assignments and tests. We want to be more effective, and we want our work to be meaningful. One way of creating meaning and being more effective is in establishing purposeful interactions in the classroom, and one way of doing this is with rapport.

2. What is rapport and why does it matter?

For many teachers, content and delivery are what matter in the classroom. Our job is to ensure learning outcomes, and this can be achieved, it is believed, through our expert knowledge, instruction, and assessment. For students, however, coming into the classroom for the first time means entering into states of vulnerability and uncertainty. Vulnerability regarding their lack of content knowledge and uncertainty about their ability to understand and meet course demands. In high stakes situations, these anxieties may be compounded by the negative consequences of failure. Students must also contend with vulnerability and uncertainty related to unknown relational dynamics. Will they be accepted? Will they be liked? Will they make friends? Will the teacher be democratic and friendly or autocratic and cold? These rhetorical and relational vulnerabilities are also shaped and exacerbated by the experiences and beliefs students bring with them regarding classrooms, teacher-student relationships, and school in general. What eases the negative emotions of vulnerability and uncertainty are positive emotions fostered by teachers who create welcome classroom environments characterized by interpersonal connection and rapport.

Rapport in the classroom has been defined and operationalized in a number of ways. It has been described as a behavior (Webb & Berrett, 2014), a relationship (Fananda & Clark, 2004), a personal connection and an enjoyable interaction (Gremier & Gwinner, 2000), and as beliefs and perceptions about the mutual, trusting prosocial bond between those involved (Frisby & Housley Gaffney, 2015; Frisby & Martin, 2010; Frisby & Myers, 2008). A common theme between these different definitions is their synonymic relationship to notions of mutual connection, trust, and positive regard. Rapport is often collocated with verbs like *build* and *establish*, and with prepositions like *with* and *between*, alluding to mental representations of co-constructing a supportive bridge between entities.

Interpersonal connection – interactions that are socially and emotionally significant – are marked by positive affect and prosocial behaviors. Prosocial behaviors, which serve to benefit individuals and society, include helpfulness, caring, availability, service, and cooperation. These behaviors embody the characteristics of a healthy community in which individuals act in support of the collective. In the classroom, teachers are at the center of creating this prosocial environment. Such an environment facilitates supportive and caring teacher-student and student-student bonds, fostering positive affective states that have been shown to reverse the deleterious effects of negative emotions (Fredrickson,

2001).

Many teachers may overlook affective dimensions of teaching with the opinion that it is not our job to attend to students' feelings. We are teachers after all, not counselors. Lowman (1984) observes that many university professors may see interpersonal connection as irrelevant to class content and even an impediment to developing independent and mature graduates. This view, I argue, is a misguided and incomplete picture of what teaching and learning entails. Attention to creating positive affect through well-managed interpersonal dynamics and rapport building is not just a "feel-good" or frivolous extra. It is critically important to both learning success and personal development. It is foundational to the learning process and something upon which our students place a high value.

Meyers (2009) and others (Buskist et al., 2002, cited in Meyers, 2009) have shown how there is a difference between student and instructor rankings in the importance of teaching traits. While students consistently rank interpersonal traits high in importance, professors prioritize instructional ones. Feldman (1988) further illustrates this gap, showing that students tend to favor a teacher's ability to stimulate interest, their capacity for availability and helpfulness, and their elocutionary skills. In contrast, instructors prioritize providing intellectual challenge, fostering independent thought and self-initiated learning, and setting high standards. The most effective teachers fall somewhere in the center of this continuum. Lowman (1984, p. 11) states, effective teaching is serving the preferences of students by being teachers who are "democratic and approachable" while also providing intellectual excitement through content and delivery. These teachers see interpersonal connection as a means to develop an interactional approach to learning and lead students toward independence by providing them with a reliable and supportive model. To this end, these teachers meet the needs of students in a more holistic way, creating fruitful conditions for learning.

Rapport and connection are what prime the classroom with the positive emotions that render teaching and learning most effective. These emotions fostered through prosocial relationships are what facilitate the behaviors that lead to greater learning potential. In the next section, I will expound on this point by zooming in on three specific emotions: feelings of trust, support, and connection. I will show how these emotions are created through student-teacher rapport, and I will draw a relationship between these feelings and specific behavioral outcomes. I will conclude by suggesting how these behaviors improve the likelihood of learning success.

3. Rapport: positive emotions, behaviors, and learning

Let us begin with an analogy. In team-building exercises there is a commonly used activity known as a trust fall. A trust fall is when participants intentionally fall into the arms of other members, trusting that they will be caught. It shows participants, at least in theory, that they can rely on team members when taking risks, engaging in tasks, and developing requisite skills while feeling safe and supported. Rapport, and the positive emotions and behaviors that it evokes, works in very much the same way. Here, I am proposing a Trust Fall Theory of learning. That is, when students discover that they can rely on the support of the teacher, they can safely engage in the type of academic behaviors that will lead them to learning success.

Frymier and Houser (2000) have observed that when teacher-student communication becomes interpersonal, trust is built, and students are then more willing to engage and take risks. Like participants in the trust fall, students are placed in conditions of vulnerability. Unlike that team building exercise, however, consequences for students may be quite severe in high-stakes situations. Under threat of failure, they are required to complete assignments, take tests, and to learn content that they may have no interest in. When students discover support from their teacher, their risk-taking and engagement is reinforced. A student's ability to trust in a teacher as a source of knowledge and a source of care can have a tremendous benefit to both their learning and wellbeing.

The Trust Fall Theory suggests that when students experience teacher support through praise, encouragement, acceptance, and other forms of positive feedback, they are more likely to seek out the knowledge and support of that teacher. These *approach behaviors*, or what I refer to as *seeking-out-behaviors*, are a critical developmental step in a student's burgeoning autonomy. Seeking out clarification, feedback, and advice, engaging in in-class and out of class communication with the teacher, and asking questions are all considered *seeking-out-behaviors* according to this theory. Research by Dobransky and Frymier (2004) lend support to this claim, suggesting that rapport between students and teachers leads to more frequent out of class communication, a phenomenon correlated with greater learning outcomes. Additionally, Worley et al. (2007) found that when teachers create democratic environments and offer praise, encouragement, responsiveness and availability, students feel validated and supported and are then motivated to ask questions, take chances, share openly, and identify with the learning content. Worley et al. (2007, p. 221) state that the classrooms of award-winning teachers are "characterized by acceptance, affect and an appropriate balance

of the freedom to be dependent and the freedom to be independent.” In this stage of our trust fall analogy, students are discovering their “freedom to be dependent” on the teacher for support, so that they can practice the skills needed to develop self-direction and independence.

Establishing feelings of trust and support lead to deepening feelings of connection. Feelings of connection, according to the Trust Fall Theory, develop after repeated experiences of risk-taking met with support. Feelings of connection to a teacher facilitate one’s investment in content and learning and reinforce commitments because they have been associated with positive emotional rewards, i.e., support, encouragement, praise, and success. As Mottet, Frymier, and BeeBe (2006) have observed, students enter classrooms with a desire for acceptance, and it is feelings of connectedness that lead to greater participation, reduced anxiety, increased motivation, and cognitive learning (Frisby et al, 2016; Frisby & Martin, 2010; Frisby & Myers, 2008; Dobransky & Frymier, 2004). Finally, feelings of connection allow students the safety to develop the “freedom to be independent” observed above by Worley et al., (2007). Students at this stage have learned to trust in themselves and seek support in their own abilities as they begin to engage in self-directed and independent engagement.

Without the perception of mutual positive regard, however, the development of trust, support and connection are unlikely to take place. Rapport, therefore, as established by the teacher, is a critical step in laying the groundwork for interpersonal communication. Once this is in motion, trust, support, and connection can then develop interdependently. This will result in the types of proacademic behaviors with which these positive states are associated, thus having a tremendous impact on the likelihood of learning success.

4. How to build rapport

A big part of building rapport in the classroom relies on the types of verbal and non-verbal communication used by the teacher. Such *immediacy* behaviors are used to reduce physical and psychological distance and facilitate the interpersonal nature of student-instructor interactions (Mehrabian, 1969; Mehrabian, 1981, as cited in Gorham, 1988). Non-verbal immediacy includes smiling, posture, moving around the classroom, and appropriate physical contact. Each of these can be used individually or in combination to create rapport, thus conveying availability, openness, positive regard, and warmth. Moving around the classroom, for example, as opposed to staying behind a desk or podium, reducing physical and psychological distance by literally placing the teacher

on common ground and removing invisible lines of division. Research has shown that student perception of non-verbal immediacy is linked to improved cognitive and affective learning, recall and perceived teacher competence (Butland & Bebee, 1992; Richmond, Gorham & McCroskey, 1987).

Verbal forms of immediacy such as calling students by name, using humor, engaging in discussion, and disclosing personal experiences and information (e.g., hobbies, interests, likes and dislikes) opens lines of communication and encourages interaction. Specifically, using first names personalizes exchanges; using humor (which hopefully evokes laughter) helps form bonds through oxytocin release and shared insider knowledge; engaging in class and small group discussion honors individual voices in a classroom community; and engaging in self-disclosure humanizes the teacher by revealing common interests and experiences, reducing potential barriers set by age, status, culture, and positions of authority. Research shows that verbal immediacy has been linked to student course satisfaction, motivation, willingness to participate, cognitive and affective learning, and a variety of other proacademic behavioral changes (Christensen & Menzel, 1998; Frymier, 1993; Gorham, 1988; Gorham & Christophel, 1990) (see appendix 1 for a full list of verbal and non-verbal immediacy items).

While there is a difference between the larger scale affective nature of rapport and the more specific behavioral nature of immediacy (Frisby & Housley Gaffney, 2015; Wilson, Ryan & Pugh, 2010) these constructs are indelibly linked, and these practices of immediacy provide critical scaffolding for building rapport. Moreover, immediacy behaviors are easily accessible to all teachers, making them a reliable high-yield resource for building connection with students and maximizing learning outcomes.

Here I would like to offer six practical steps for building rapport with students beginning with the easiest and most accessible and ending with behaviors I view as more advanced or high-risk. Realizing that teachers may feel apprehensive about using new teaching strategies and concerned about adding more to their already busy lives, what I present here is simple and easy to blend into any teaching format. Teachers who venture to take-risks by building rapport will be met with support, connection, and better learning.

In this section, we will return to my experiences with Yuki, the troubled young woman I introduced at the outset of this article, to use my experiences with her to illustrate how simple rapport building behaviors led to tremendously positive outcomes. I should point out that I use most of these behaviors in most of my classes with most of my students. Yuki just provides one powerful anecdote for illustration and example.

While the behavioral steps and observations provided in this section are based primarily on my personal experience, all rapport building behaviors presented here have been positively supported by empirical research (see Goldstein & Benassi, 2016; Gorham & Christophel, 1990; Gorham, 1988; Torok, McMorris & Lin, 2010; Webb & Berrett, 2014 for a review).

4.1 Refer to students by name

Using a student's first name has several benefits worth noting. First, it communicates to a student that you know who they are and that you remember them. Whenever I see former students and refer to them by name, they always express surprise and excitement. Second, using the student's name personalizes the encounters by making that student the sole recipient of the exchange. Third, it makes the student feel attended to and cared about as an individual. Finally, for the more practical minded among us, using a student's name zeros in their auditory attention and serves to exclude other sensory input. This is a phenomenon known as the cocktail party effect, which makes it possible for people to focus on one set of sensory stimuli, such as a conversation they are having, while ignoring other stimuli, such as all the other conversations in the room. Hearing one's own name often triggers this effect.

When I first began to get to know Yuki, I was sure to refer to her by name for all the reasons I listed above. I found that almost instantly Yuki would reciprocate by giving me her full attention. Even though she struggled to verbally respond, I could see that she wanted to talk to me. Using her name personalized our exchanges, created familiarity, and communicated respect and availability. It also showed that I noticed her, and while she sat frozen and unable to speak, hearing her own name validated that she was in fact an important member of the classroom.

4.2 Move around the room

Another simple yet powerful way to connect to our students is simply moving around the room. When we do this, we create a fluid space in which no one is bound to a desk or seating assignment (unless they are). Students also know that you will be over to see them at some point, that you are taking time and making physical effort to reduce invisible boundaries. In a sense you are mingling in their world, creating interaction and literal motion. This animates the class, giving it vitality and energy. You do not need to do cartwheels, just simply vary your typical movements in such a way that augments the subject you are teaching. Learning is made much easier when there is visual stimulation

to quicken the learning content.

If I hadn't been moving around the room, I would have never met Yuki. I had to take the first step (literally) toward getting to know her. My ability to move and place myself within eye-contact and auditory range so that I could pick up on the subtleties of her communication allowed me to be available to her by simply being there. It shouldn't seem as if I were always by her side, I wasn't. I gave her barely any more attention or proximity than I do every other student. My movement stayed fluid in the room, much like an eddy drawing the currents of her attention. She knew that I would eventually be near enough should she want to make contact.

4.3 Listen

There are several ways that listening develops rapport. First, listening communicates that we care what a student has to contribute and that we are available to attend to their specific learning needs even if that means getting them outside help. Second, listening gives us a lot of valuable information on what the student has understood or not understood about the content. It tells us about who they are or who they aspire to be. It gives us background information and points of commonality to serve in building connection and familiarity. Finally, it communicates caring and attention to them as individuals.

As Yuki began to trust me, she began to take chances and talk to me. When she did so, I listened and learned more about who she was and where she came from. Listening served to communicate that I cared about her, and this support positively reinforced her risk-taking and engagement. Eventually, Yuki would initiate conversation, ask me how I was doing, and seek out interaction with me. By far, the most impactful benefit to my listening to her was when she told me about her intentions to commit suicide. She told me, I assume, because she trusted me and knew I would listen to her. Because she was able to talk to me, and I was available to listen, I could get her the help and support that she needed.

4.4 Self-disclose

Self-disclosure humanizes us to our students. As teachers, we are in a very unique position in the social hierarchy. We may represent friend or foe, support or opposition, open-minded egalitarian or non-nonsense autocrat. By pulling back the curtain to reveal something about who we are, what our interests are, what we enjoy, students can realize that we have common ground and that we are not so different after all. Teachers also like

music and movies and meeting with friends. We have all been 18–22-year-old college students shaping our identities and our views of the world. When students know who we are, or at least know that we are human, rapport often comes quite easily. As an activity, I often do a *Teacher On-The-Spot* guessing game in the first lesson of the semester. Students have a list of questions for which they have to guess how I will answer. Items include my birthday, where I am from, music that I like, hobbies, interests and so on. Students always enjoy the activity and often come to me after class to point out common interests or to share something about themselves, thus sowing the seeds of rapport.

One of the reasons that I think Yuki trusted me was that I was open to sharing things about myself. Yuki struggled with negative thoughts and viewed the world in such a way that made her feel cut off from everyone. She told me she could not get along with her professors and that she felt lonely and without purpose. Rather than simply give her advice, I commiserated and shared similar troubles I had growing up. I humanized myself by expressing empathy and sharing feelings and thoughts that normalized her experiences in hopes of drawing her out of her self-imposed isolation. Whenever I did this she always thanked me for talking to her and sharing things about myself. Self-disclosure connected her to a world of others that she felt disconnected from.

4.5 Use humor

I have found humor to be one of the most powerful ways to build connection with students. A well-timed joke or pun or show of wit humanizes the classroom, disarms feelings of seriousness, creates color in the lesson, breaks up the monotony of classroom routine, facilitates bonding, and engenders positive feelings from students about us. Admittedly humor may feel more high-risk than the other forms of rapport building presented above, but I can assure you that a little goes a long way.

One way of injecting humor is by playing off what we know about our students with references to pop-culture, music, viral sensations, or by making brief forays into student parlance and patois. These behaviors pack both humor and subtle communication, and let our students know that we know more about the world than our lecture content. Humor has a way of refocusing and reinvigorating attention laying the positive affective groundwork for better learning.

I will admit that I did not make Yuki laugh much, but I made her smile often. I know that the contagion of enjoyment that spread in the classroom through humor infected her with enough levity and positive surroundings to loosen her grip on her seriousness and concerns. Even if she did not laugh out loud with her classmates, I think she knew that

she could count on me for wit and a playful perspective. I think that one of the reasons she thought that I was kind, was that I wanted her and her classmates to enjoy their learning experiences, and there is no better way to do this than with a bit of laughter.

4.6 Make appropriate physical contact

I present this last because it will be considered by far the most high-risk of all the behaviors. Given the seriousness of unwanted and inappropriate student-teacher contact one must be conscientious and broach this behavior with care. For now, so that we may move forward, let's give each other the benefit of the doubt that we both know what is inappropriate so that I can point to the benefits of well-timed, well-meaning physical contact.

Physical contact is one of the most basic forms of primate communication. It is fundamental to our physical and psychological developmental and well-being. Used appropriately in the classroom, through handshakes, high-fives, fist-bumps, pats on the shoulder, it acts as a sparingly used form of praise, encouragement, congratulations, togetherness, and positive regard. It relays a sense of connection perhaps more than any other type of communication, and it makes people feel supported.

As an English language teacher part of the subject matter deals with the sociocultural practice of normalizing a handshake. When I tried to shake Yuki's hand for the first time, she shied away. As she grew more comfortable with me and started to engage, I would always offer my hand to say hello and goodbye, and for a long time she would look sadly at me and grow quiet. One day she told me that if she shook my hand that I would hate her. Surprised, I asked why. It turned out that Yuki lived with a condition called palmer hyperhidrosis, which is a when people sweat profusely and almost exclusively from their hands. For Yuki, although she wanted to shake my hand, she felt that I would reject her and "hate" her. That must have been an incredible burden to bear. I told her I didn't care, and that I wanted to shake her hand anyway. With visible fear in her eyes, she reached forward and shook my hand. When she saw that I didn't hate her, that I didn't pull away, that I didn't think she was gross, a wall seemed to come down from around her. I just smiled and said, "Nice to meet you."

5. Conclusion

The importance of building rapport in the classroom goes far beyond simply creating a pleasant atmosphere. Rapport lays the affective groundwork for the cognitive learning

outcomes that we as teachers work so hard to achieve. It is also something that students value and seek out in their teachers. By building rapport through simple practices of removing physical and psychological distance we can better serve the learning and relational needs of our students. Given the tremendous impact that teachers have on the developing social and professional lives of students, developing healthy interpersonal connections should be considered a priority. Suggesting a way forward has provided the context and impetus for writing this paper.

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