

Building Rapport Online

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Need for Innovation

Rapport is characterized in teachers who are “caring, welcoming, encouraging, positive, democratic, and have expressed a genuine interest in their students” (Estep & Roberts, 2013, p. 182). Building rapport with students in a traditional learning environment can significantly impact student retention, engagement, and academic achievement (Estep & Roberts, 2013; Meyers, 2009). With the impact of COVID-19 and mandated online learning, building rapport with students has become challenging as the traditional rapport building strategies are not as salient in the virtual environment. Kennette & Redd (2015) provide suggestions for personalizing interactions online by individualizing announcements and emails, discussion post responses, assignment feedback, and overall comments. Intentionally building rapport with students through one-on-one meetings, video updates, and personalized communication during online courses can improve student achievement, motivation, and online retention (Glazier, 2016; Kennette, 2019; Neuhauser, 2010; Starcher, 2011).

How It Works

When the Fall 2020 semester transitioned to an entirely virtual learning environment, building rapport with students became more challenging for instructors. In response, an effort was made to identify and implement new and modified strategies for building rapport, both between instructor to student and student to student. Through various internet searches and discussions with colleagues, online rapport building strategies were implemented in the undergraduate courses within the Department of Agricultural and Human Sciences at NC State University.

For an introductory Career and Technical Education course (n=28), students were scheduled to meet every other week synchronously on Zoom and for an upper-level Professional Presentations in Agricultural Organizations course (n=14), students met asynchronously every Tuesday and synchronously every Thursday. At the beginning of each “live” lesson, students were encouraged to engage in casual conversation with their classmates and instructors. To facilitate discussion and engagement, students participated in various strategies during each synchronous class meeting. Some of these examples include but are not limited to responding to polls developed within Zoom, sharing favorite TV shows on various streaming services, favorite songs/musical artists, and participating in a virtual scavenger hunt. Commonly, these were simple discussions, but within the class, breakout rooms and group learning assignments also contributed to helping build rapport with and amongst students in an online learning environment.

One of the favorite activities was the virtual scavenger hunt where students were provided instructions at the beginning of the class on the scavenger hunt and then the list of ten items was placed in the chat window within Zoom and displayed through the Share Screen option. Students were given approximately 5 minutes to locate items such as something that became essential when COVID hit, something with at least four colors on it, something from agriculture, something that can be used to fix things, and something that you have created. All students returned within the time limit with their collected items and then displayed their items

as we progressed through the list of ten items. This five-minute exercise completed at the beginning of the semester helped showcase student interests (something that you created) and promoted humor during a time where students expressed frustration with the move to remote-only course delivery and challenges associated with distance education.

Results to Date/Implications

Within these classes, the instructors found the rapport building strategies used during each class created a learning environment that was welcoming and reinforced those same community building components that are more commonly present during live classes. In addition, it was surprising to see how many students started turning on their cameras as the semester continued. This served as an indicator of the increased comfort level amongst students, their peers, and the course instructors. The scavenger hunt provided instructors and classmates the opportunity to learn more about each other as students selected items that were sentimental to them, created by them, or unique to their interests and location. These personal characteristics were also used by the instructors to group students for future assignments. For example, two students both found items emphasizing their love for the cattle industry during the scavenger hunt. Later, they were partnered to work on a research project focused on land development impacting ranchers. Students in the introductory course shared through an online feedback survey their appreciation for the rapport building strategies and expressed they helped to mimic face-to-face instruction and allowed time to get to know fellow students and the instructor/professor.

Future Plans/Advice to Others

To promote rapport building in an online learning environment, instructors/professors are encouraged to identify and incorporate strategies allowing them to get to know more about their students. Implementation of student feedback surveys, one-on-one meetings, or activities such as the scavenger hunt are recommended. Planning and critical thinking is recommended for developing rapport building strategies for large online classes, such as cohorts within the large class and check-ins with each student through an online scheduling system to manage a large volume of students. For the virtual scavenger hunt, adding a competitive aspect with a reward for most unique items or most items collected could increase student motivation and engagement. It is recommended that the instructor/professor actively participate to build rapport and create a mutual respect and understanding with students. The activities used ranged from 5 minutes to 25 minutes, but each activity placed an important role in creating a community among the class.

Costs/Resources Needed

Secure access to a virtual learning platform such as Zoom or Microsoft Teams is needed to facilitate activities such as the virtual scavenger hunt, breakout rooms, or annotate features. To build personal connections with students, the course instructor(s) will need to know how to utilize various technologies that allow for individualized communications. No monetary cost was associated with implementing this idea (unless monetary prizes were awarded for a competition-based strategy), but some time will have to be dedicated to identifying possibilities for rapport building activities and then structuring those ideas for integration into the course.

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