Building Rapport for Online Instructors

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Abstract
Online instruction continues to play an increasing role in secondary education. While strides have been made in both the number and variety of offerings, providing the interactions of the traditional classroom remains problematic. The benefits of rapport, in both traditional and online classes, include improved classroom and course management, higher student motivation, enhanced communication between students and instructors, and improved learning outcomes. Strong rapport in online learning environments is viewed positively by both students and faculty members. However, answers to the question as to which instructor traits support the building of rapport remains largely unanswered.

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1 Introduction
As technology becomes more pervasive, its depersonalizing effects continue to exist as a source of concern (Kille, Bates & Murray, 2014; Dickinson, 2010; LeVine, 2010; Nilles, 2012). Replicating the interactions of the traditional classroom is problematic and, in some cases, impossible (Aoun, 2011). Strong relationships between students and instructors have been linked to better classroom management (Docan-Morgan and Manusov, 2009; Koolbreeze, 2009; Weimer, 2011), higher student motivation (Buskist & Saville, n.d.; Weimer, 2011) enhanced communication (Catt, Miller & Schallenkamp, 2007; Dixson, 2010), and improved learning outcomes (Frymier, 2007; Swenson, 2010; Weimer, 2011). And, strong rapport in online learning environments is viewed positively by students (Meyers, 2009; Williamson, 2009) as well as by instructors (Coupland, 2003; Sull, 2009).

However, the identification of which instructor traits support the building of rapport remains largely undone (Frisby & Martin, 2010; Murphy & Rodriguez-Manzanares, 2012). To do this, we must first define rapport; and then, identify the rapport-building traits deemed as useful and effective. For this study, rapport in online learning environments was defined as a close and interactive relationship that is built upon trust, shared control, and engagement in activities that are aimed at advancing the skills, abilities, or knowledge of a clearly defined group, and of its individual members.

It has been argued that rapport cannot directly lead to learning (Granitz, Koernig, & Harich, 2009; Reeves & Reeves, 1997; Sull, 2009); however, it is an essential feature to foster conditions for learning, as it creates a climate of open communication, comfort, respect, and approachability; thus, it is important to recognize the traits that contribute to its creation.

2 Methodology
2.1 Data Collection
Participants were undergraduate and graduate students, enrolled in Education and Instructional Technology courses offered 100% online. Recruiting was accomplished through purposeful sampling via email and notices posted in course websites. Subjects completed a survey, consisting of Likert-scaled items that drew from earlier, proven Likert scale assessments (Creasey, Jarvis, & Knapcik, 2009; Crook & Booth, 1997; Gremler & Gwinner, 2000) and from a review of existing literature (Chickering & Gamson, 1987; Crook & Booth, 1997; Ellis 2000; Goodboy & Myers, 2008; Moore, 1989):

- Humor: This instructor has a good sense of humor.
- Attitude: This instructor displays a positive attitude.
- Contact: This instructor encourages contact between students and him/herself.
- Active learning: This instructor encourages active learning.
• Collaboration: This instructor encourages collaboration amongst students.
• Time on task: This instructor emphasizes time on task.
• Diversity: This instructor respects students’ diverse talents and ways of learning.
• Dependable: This instructor is dependable.
• Informal: This instructor encourages informal (non-course related) communication from students.
• Honest: This instructor is honest.
• Organized: This instructor is very organized.
• Trustworthy: This instructor is trustworthy.
• Respectful: This instructor is respectful.
• Expectations: This instructor communicates high expectations.
• Interactive: This instructor uses an interactive teaching style.

Demographic data including gender, age, experience with distance learning, and current enrollment in an online course, was also collected; however, its analysis did not display any significant difference from the sample as a whole.

Semi-structured interviews of willing participants completed the data collection efforts. Only two participants participated in these follow-up interviews. Separate interview sessions were conducted with both “Anna” and “Betty.”

2.2 Data Analysis

Preliminary data analysis established the median, mode, and summed scores (see Table 1). Principal component analysis identified four components. However, weakness in the third and fourth components (containing only two factors and one factor, respectively) prompted a forced extraction to three components that yielded more practical results (see Table 2).

Component analysis confirmed the presence of two constructs (Gremler & Gwinner, 2000) of Enjoyable Interaction (Component 2) and Personal Connection (Component 3). Component 1 appeared to have the strongest correlation to the creation of rapport with students. The traits of Active and Interactive supported engagement between peers, students and instructors, helping to create the perception that students were interacting with people, not merely technology. Because of this, the construct was given the title of Social Presence.
The semi-structured interviews of willing participants provided data that could not be collected from the more formally-structured survey. The semi-structured interviews corroborated the findings from the survey to create a more inclusive view of the results. Both subjects viewed many of the same items as important (rated 5 or higher); however, they did rank these items differently (see Table 3).
Analysis of the interviews produced four major themes that related to rapport-building traits of online instructors (Creswell, 2009).

- Rapport-building traits that contributed to understanding facilitated the students’ efforts to make a connection between course content and real life. The interactions of these traits aided retention through meaning making.
- Rapport-building traits that affected the learning experience served as the essence of Enjoyable Interaction and Personal Connection. They allowed students to do better in an environment where differences were respected.
- Combinations of rapport-building traits were, in some cases, more effective than when displayed individually. Betty tied Honesty and being Dependable to helping a student keep focused; both Anna and Betty linked Time on Task to Honesty and Expectations.
- The responsibility for a meaningful student-instructor relationship was seen to rest primarily with the instructor. Betty stated that a sense of togetherness related to the social presence of the instructor, and made for a better course experience. She also noted that “Rapport does not equate to a friendship relationship.” She concluded by stating that power relationships should be in place in a learning environment.

3 Major Findings

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Rating</th>
<th>Anna</th>
<th>Betty</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Attitude, Contact, Active, Learning, Dependable, Honest, Trustworthy, Respectful, Interactive, Organized</td>
<td>Dependable, Time on Task, Trustworthy, Expectations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Diversity, Expectations</td>
<td>Attitude, Active, Learning, Diversity, Honest, Interactive, Collaboration, Respectful</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Time on Task, Informal</td>
<td>Humor, Contact, Organized</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Humor, Collaboration</td>
<td>Informal</td>
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Table 3. Interviewees’ Rating and Ranking of Traits
There was a marked preference for personality traits over pedagogical ones. The traits of Honest, Dependable, Trustworthy, and Organized were viewed as being of primary importance, serving as four of the top-five ranked items in the survey. The traits of Trustworthy and Respectful were also ranked favorably; but not as highly as the four above-mentioned ones. Comments made during the semi-structured interviews reiterated the importance of these traits, showed a connection between many of them, and also added Organized to the mix.

Principal component analysis also identified traits related to Enjoyable Interaction and Personal Connection as components of rapport-building. Social Presence arose as the major component of rapport-building in online learning environments. This component also reaffirmed the subjects’ preference for rapport-building personality traits over pedagogy, with six of the traits being instructor-related: Dependable, Trustworthy, Honest, Organized, Attitude, and Diversity. Only three, Contact, Active Learning, and Interactive, related to pedagogy. Enjoyable Interaction consisted of the pedagogical activities of Time on Task, Collaboration, and Expectations. And Personal Connection was comprised of the traits Informal, Humor, and Respectful.

4 Conclusion
The importance of this study lies in its identification and ranking of specific rapport-building traits that students respond positively to. The findings of this study could guide the development of a more personable pedagogy for online instruction, and assist students in understanding how their preferences for rapport-building practices could lead to increased satisfaction and improved learning outcomes.

As we continue to advance instructional technology, we must also strive to maintain and fortify the interpersonal connections that technology-based learning environments, especially those utilized in online instruction- can strip away. Research in the building of rapport, the creation of social presence, and other efforts at humanizing technology becomes more critical as the development and utilization of technology becomes more advanced. If we are to make online instruction more effective, the study of rapport-building practices must be continued and expanded. The diversity of students' learning styles and instructional needs, the varied instructional approaches and possibly-applicable learning theories, the ongoing development and adoption of new technological innovations, makes it essential that we continue to examine and experiment with the pedagogy and processes that effectively support the building of rapport in online learning environments. This study and others like it are merely steps in the right direction along a trail that extends well beyond the horizon of our knowledge, experience, and expectations.

5 References


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