

Building Better Rapport With Students: Advice for New Engineering Educators

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Abstract

Good rapport between faculty and students and its influence on effective teaching is well known.¹⁻² Workshops³⁻⁴ and courses⁵ on effective teaching include development of faculty-student relationships as an essential part of successful teaching. As leaders and facilitators in the classroom, faculty must take the initiative to encourage the development of good rapport with their students. This is not only desired for improved teaching, but developing rapport with others may be a lesson in and of itself for the students. Experience developing professional relationships with superiors as well as colleagues is as important to the future career plans of students as it is for the student and teacher in the present classroom environment. Developing good rapport with students can result in more effective teaching, improved student evaluations, and a more rewarding experience for faculty and students in the and out of the classroom. Suggestions from the literature, as well as the author's own experiences for developing and improving student-faculty rapport are provided. With practice, developing good rapport with students can become second nature.

Introduction

New educators face many challenges in the early years of a tenure-track faculty position. One key to achieving tenure is demonstrated proficiency in teaching. At many institutions, proficiency in teaching is evaluated in part through student teaching evaluations. In evaluating faculty, students often consider the level of rapport they have developed with their instructor. At undergraduate teaching institutions where teaching is the primary function and excellence in teaching is considered vital for tenure, developing good rapport with students is essential for success.

At institutions where large numbers of graduate students have teaching responsibilities, programs designed to develop teaching skills may address the importance of good rapport and techniques for achieving it.⁵ Others learn about improving teacher-student rapport through books,¹ magazine articles² or teaching workshops.³⁻⁴ Unfortunately, some new faculty members are not properly trained in this aspect of teaching and do not fully appreciate the skills necessary to develop good rapport with students. This can be frustrating for new faculty who feel they expend great effort in their teaching only to receive less than desired ratings on student teaching evaluations. Educators tend to blame the students, claiming "they do not appreciate us." The problem however, may be related to our priorities as new educators and our attitude toward our students. To overcome this difficulty, educators need to adopt an attitude of good customer service in their role as educators. This begins by spending some effort learning the skills needed to develop and maintain good rapport with students. In addition to improved teaching evaluations, good rapport with students may help make the first few years of teaching more personally rewarding. Many senior faculty note the most rewarding aspect of their profession has been the students and the relationships resulting from their experiences in the classroom.

Techniques for Developing Good Rapport

There are a number of techniques for developing good rapport with students. Each has its own advantages and difficulties. To develop good rapport between students and instructors, both parties must be drawn together in a sharing relationship. To accomplish this, students and instructors should get to know each other and they should show concern and respect for each other and their respective roles in the learning process.

Getting to Know Your Students

One of the first ways you can get to know your students is to learn their names as quickly as possible. Learning student names is essential for good rapport.^{2-4, 6-7} In large classes this may be challenging. Several methods have been suggested to help learn student names. On the first day of class, have students state their name as you videotape them.³ Then review the video several times to associate faces with names. Name memorizing games are also possible.² Students could also place name cards on their desk in class for the first few weeks of the semester. Another possibility is to use a digital camera in class and an informal seating chart.² This can be reviewed outside of class to associate faces and names. Instructors have discussed the surprise students expressed when the instructor remembered their names.³⁻⁴

Knowing more than just student names is also beneficial to building rapport. A survey of student interests and background at the beginning of the semester can be used to find out more about students.⁶ Knowing something about their background and interests outside of class, such as musical taste, favorite movie, etc., shows interest in the student as a person. It provides materials for personal discussions outside of class.⁶ Sharing the results with the class such as most popular movies, favorite musical groups, etc., can provide connection within the class.⁶

Another method is to have students write a memo about themselves. The author requires junior and senior level civil engineering technology (CET) students to submit all assignments with a memo. At the beginning of the semester, guidelines for memo preparation are distributed along with a sample memo. In the sample memo, the author presents information about himself including where he's from, why he went into civil engineering, where he went to school and worked, as well as hobbies and outside interests. Students are then required to submit a memo telling the author about themselves. Students generally indicate where they are from, what interested them about civil engineering, their summer job experiences, and other interests. A copy of the assignment is included in the appendix.

This assignment has allowed the author to learn more about the students than just their names. Knowing information about their hometown and outside interests has provided opportunities for conversations outside of class. One student even opened up considerably and discussed depressed feelings about school and dormitory life. At first the author was unsure how to deal with this revelation by the student. Discussions with other faculty and campus counseling personnel helped identify ways to help the student. Attempts have been made to include the student more in class activities and extracurricular activities, as well. The author also talked with the student outside of class to see if he needed to talk more and to refer him to counseling services available on campus.

Students also approached the author to serve as faculty advisor for a non-academic student organization. This resulted from the author's discussion of outside interests in the sample memo handed out to students.

Another way for faculty to get to know students better is to arrange field trips and involve them in professional society meetings. The author currently serves an assistant program chair for a local ASCE technical group. Approximately five meetings per year are held and students are allowed to attend free of charge. The author has invited students to attend and arranged transportation. In addition, field trips have been arranged to coincide with the trips to the ASCE meetings. Students attending these meetings have had more opportunities to interact socially with the author and both have benefited from this interaction. Even though all students do not participate in these opportunities, students attending these meetings discuss their experiences with other students, helping improve rapport in general.

Advising provides another opportunity for faculty to get to know students.⁷⁻¹⁰ Setting up an advising schedule and requiring advisees to stop by periodically provides interaction between students and faculty.⁸ At one institution,⁹ an introductory course requires students to stop by and meet all faculty in the department during the semester. The intention is to help develop rapport between students and faculty.⁹ A similar approach has used mandatory advising sessions to help improve retention of engineering technology students.¹⁰

Let Students Get to Know You

Faculty should make an effort to let their students get to know them. This maybe easier in graduate programs, but at the undergraduate level it also needs to be considered. The author uses a memo to tell students a little about himself, his academic and work background, and hobbies and interests. The author also uses examples from his work experiences in his classes. These experiences not only provide technical case histories but also interesting and sometimes humorous stories about working in the real world. These experiences help build rapport between the students and author by letting the students see the author as a real person. Humor has been noted as helping build rapport.^{6,13}

A positive attitude and enthusiasm in and out of the classroom promote student desire to get to know a professor. According to Wankat and Oreovicz,² faculty with a positive attitude keep students focused on learning. Showing that you truly want them to learn improves student attitudes toward you and your course. Enthusiasm for the material may also rub off on students.² Seeing your interest in the material will draw them in as well. Projecting this enthusiasm may be easy in courses closest to one's academic interests. The challenge is to be enthusiastic about those courses not directly related to one's area of specialization.

Advising again provides an opportunity to establish rapport. Students visiting the author's office for advising occasionally comment on a whitewater rafting photograph or an engineering "toy" on a shelf. This often leads to a conversation about outside interests that helps build rapport. Other opportunities result from running into students during trips to the student union to feed a popcorn habit, at a basketball game, or about town. Being friendly with students outside of class is easy, but you must know their names in order to take advantage of this rapport building opportunity.

Getting feedback from students and giving them your feedback also helps build rapport.¹⁴ The author shares with undergraduate students his involvement in ASEE and ASCE. Students know that when they provide feedback on a particular educational experience, a conference paper will result. The author also encourages students to provide feedback and suggestions for improvement during class evaluations. Letting them know how much you appreciate their input helps build the relationship. Sharing the comments the following semester helps them realize that attention is paid to their comments. Similarly, providing them feedback on the way a course went in a given semester, compared to others helps them know that you are not just going through the motions of teaching, but that each class is unique.

Establishing Concern and Respect for Each Other

All faculty and students should show concern and respect for each other. However, students often feel faculty lack concern for them. Faculty also believe students care only about getting a grade and do not care about learning the material or the professional connection established in the classroom. Both need to understand each other. As leaders and facilitators in the classroom, faculty need to establish the importance of mutual respect in the educational setting.

Establishing a fair, reasonable and consistent learning environment in the classroom is essential for creating mutual respect between faculty and students. At the author's institution, a faculty member who feels himself to be extremely concerned with student learning, is actually perceived by the students to have an arrogant attitude in the classroom. To show concern and treat students with respect, faculty members need to remember what it was like to be a student, as well as understand how different it is to be a student today. To gain student respect, faculty need to be prepared to teach the material and they need to be fair and consistent in evaluating student learning.

Wankat and Oreovicz² present a number of ways to build better rapport. Being polite toward students and treating them with respect as individuals is essential.^{2,11} Faculty should be available for students both in and out of class. Office hours should be kept² and should be accessible to students. One semester, the author unknowingly scheduled office hours during times when students were meeting in other classes. Asking students if the scheduled office hours were good for them revealed the conflict. Office hours were adjusted somewhat to better accommodate student schedules. Being flexible is also recommended.² Sometimes making an appropriate compromise or accommodation for a student is the good thing to do. Faculty should also learn to appreciate that each student has their own special talents.²

Wankat and Oreovicz² also note that when students present problems, faculty should be gentle but fair. The message that must be communicated is that the work is unacceptable, not the student.² They also advise faculty not to take personally the lack of motivation or interest students often exhibit.² Their lack of interest may be due to the many different pressures they face while in school. Trying to understand their world may help in relating to students today.

Wankat and Oreovicz² also indicate that trust is important. Students should be trusted until they give reason to do otherwise.² When grading, faculty must remember that the grade is based on the work and not on their personal feelings about the student.² Tough but fair instructors will

earn the respect of their students.² Grading practices perceived as unfair or inconsistent potentially result in poor of student-faculty rapport.¹¹

Advising also provides opportunities for faculty to express concern for students and their learning. Taking a little extra time during advising to find out how the semester or a notoriously difficult course is going may help a student open up and make a connection and develop improved rapport.

Wankat¹² notes that students can be tolerant of a bad lecture here or there if the instructor has good rapport. Assuming that students are intelligent and can learn if they want to is the best attitude to bring to the classroom.¹² He states that “professors with a good attitude usually end up with students with good attitudes.”¹²

Conclusions

Developing good rapport with students can result in more effective teaching, improved student evaluations, and a more rewarding experience for faculty and students in the and out of the classroom. To develop and improve rapport, instructors should get to know their students, they should show concern and respect for students and their learning, and they should let their students get to know them.

Getting to know one’s students means learning their names, their backgrounds and outside interests. Knowing and using student names can be the single most important way to initiate good rapport. Learning student names quickly takes some effort, but each year it becomes easier. To help fully develop good rapport, having students write a memo providing other information for better understanding student background and interests is suggested. Exhibiting concern and respect for students should be practiced by all faculty. This can be accomplished by being fair and consistent in and out of the classroom. A positive attitude and enthusiasm in the classroom help facilitate student interest in getting to know their instructor. People are interested in improved relationships with others who are positive and enthusiastic.

Throughout a student’s academic career, opportunities occur for faculty to develop and nurture good rapport. Trying different methods, and practicing and perfecting those that work can result in development of good student –instructor rapport becoming second nature.

Appendix

MEMORANDUM

To: CET 1131 Students
From: Professor Rose
Date: August 27, 2001
Subject: Assignment 1

Read the attached guidelines on submitting all assignments with memos, as well as the sample memo.

Write a one-page memo to me telling me about yourself. You may want to include where your are from or grew up (township/borough and county or state, etc.), why you have chosen to major in civil engineering technology (CET), what areas within CET you are most interested in, what you did this past summer, and what your career plans may

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be. Feel free to add anything else about hobbies or other interests you may have that will help me to get to know you better.

Please submit this assignment on Wednesday, August 29, 2001.

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