

Building Positive and Effective Relationships with Students:

What they Look Like and How they are Created

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Abstract

In this paper, I discuss student-teacher relationships. The question driving my research is: what does a positive and effective relationship with students look like, and how do I achieve this type of connection with my own students? I use academic articles along with my own data collection in order to form four hypotheses on how these relationships are formed: open educators, the teacher as an ally, humor as an effective resource, and instructors showing care. I believe that students are able to learn effectively when they have a positive and productive relationship with their teachers. In the future I hope to discover how *I* can create the most effective student-teacher relationships in my own classroom.

Building Positive Relationships with Students: What they Look Like and How they are Created

**Introduction**

Rapport with students is one of the most important things a teacher creates in the classroom. This relationship will affect how educators interact with their students and how students will view their educators. I chose to explore student-teacher relationships because as a future teacher, I need to be aware of how to build effective connections with students. Students will have a greater retention of information with a positive relationship with their teacher. It is more comfortable and enjoyable when they feel they have a good relationship with their instructors. In addition, it is beneficial that I understand what a positive and effective relationship looks like for my success as an educator. My goal is for my future students to have a positive and effective relationship with their teacher. Throughout this paper I will state my findings and use outside research to answer the question: what does a positive and effective relationship with students look like, and how do I achieve this type of connection with my own students?

**Literature Review**

**Open Educators**

One of the first steps in establishing rapport with students is building trust between instructor and learner. Not only is it imperative that trust is established, but “the students want to trust their teacher to guide them in the learning process,” (Catt, Miller, & Schallenkamp, 2007). According to Vatterott (2007), “learning is a risky business,” and this is especially true in middle school students who are afraid of failure. It is extraordinarily difficult to trust a complete stranger. As a result, it is important that teachers reveal facts about themselves.

“[Students] need to be able to connect at some other level, to feel positive about the teacher as a person,” (Vatterott, 2007). In order to facilitate this connection, teachers need to

disclose personal information. Knowing teachers have lives outside of school will help humanize them and decrease the distance between them and their students. “Self-disclosure is a way for the teacher to signal that he or she is a member of the classroom community, not just the teacher,” (Vatterott, 2007). This will reduce the feeling of “power over” the classroom and help students understand that learning is a partner process. In other words, “let your students know that you and they need to work together for their learning experience to succeed,” (Catt et al., 2007) so the feeling of “power with” is the dominant attitude projected onto the class.

It is not necessary for teachers to disclose every detail about their lives, but “[students are] interested in the personal experiences of instructors and want to know who instructors [are],” (Catt et al., 2007). In fact, it would even be detrimental for teachers to reveal everything about themselves. Smith (2015) discovered this when he wore a backwards baseball cap to class and a student told him he could not be taken seriously. Small, crucial details will suffice such as the name of a pet, a hometown, or a favorite food. “These personal details help the students feel comfortable and relaxed,” and especially in a foreign language classroom which typically invokes anxiety, this comfort is of the utmost importance (Smith, 2015).

Effects of disclosing personal information are both short term and long term. It builds trust that will enable learning of course material. In addition, Smith (2015) observed “less anxiety and general improvement in students’ attitudes,” just from developing a rapport through revealing personal facts. Long term, Smith (2015) noticed “increases in student engagement and student grades.” His teacher evaluations were completely positive as well: “‘I hate Spanish, but I enjoyed this class,’ or ‘He made Spanish bearable,’” (Smith, 2015). The simple act of building a relationship with students causes a positive reaction in students.

### **The Instructor as an Ally**

School is an extremely stressful environment for students. They have to worry about all of their different classes, social drama, and extracurricular activities. In order to navigate through school, students need allies that they can always count on to be present when needed. These allies are the teachers. When students feel as though their teacher is working with them during the learning process rather than against them, comfort increases and as a result, so does learning.

“The teacher who engages in role distance from the traditional definition of powerful and all-knowing scholar and instead assures students of the importance of their questions and ideas creates a social setting that would seem to encourage participation,” (Auster & Macrone, 1994). In other words, “power with” creates rapport with students because it is implied that neither can get their job done without the other. As a result, students feel their opinions matter, and their anxiety will decrease. Foreign language teachers especially need to be allies with their students. Foreign language classes cause many students anxiety, mostly because of a fear of failure. One student said, “I am afraid that the other students will laugh at me when I speak the foreign language,” (Saglamel & Kayaoglu, 2013). Students must battle judgment from peers every day and one way to ease this fear is for teachers to do their best to help students. For example, “students in the early levels of language development should receive more anxiety lowering activities,” (Saglamel & Kayaoglu, 2013). Then, once their anxiety has decreased, students will feel open and ready to participate.

Teachers can also prove to be allies by protecting their students from embarrassment. This protection will increase comfort in the classroom and “greater comfort may increase the student's willingness to try out new ideas and take intellectual risks,” (Auster & Macrone, 1994). Students will go further with new ideas if they feel comfortable taking risks. However, comfort

to take those risks evolves from the knowledge that there is no possibility of embarrassment. In a class discussion, an instructor can replace the question “What is the reason for...?” with “What may be the reason for...?” because it implies that there is no absolute right answer (Catt et al., 2007). Getting rid of the possibility of being “wrong” will increase comfort in the classroom and create a positive attitude from the student to the teacher.

### **Humor and Teacher-Student Relationships**

Humor in any social situation generally results in breaking the ice and increasing rapport between people. The same stands true for the classroom setting. Humorous people tend to be likeable and therefore easier to talk to. Using humor in the classroom evokes an emotional response and: “a learner’s emotions during an academic task can affect the learner’s motivation, engagement, and achievement,” (Kim & Thayne, 2015).

According to Wanzer (2002), “humor is arousing, which is related to gaining and keeping students’ attention, which is related to memory, which in turn is related to learning outcomes.” Teachers, who are stereotypically viewed as stern intellectuals, can easily grab the attention of unsuspecting students by using humor. In addition, immediacy, the instructor’s physical or psychological closeness, is an important factor in teacher-student relationships, and “when students view their professors as using humor frequently and effectively, they also view them as more immediate,” (Wanzer, 2002). Wanzer (2002) states that this is “because many of the same behaviors used to be funny (e.g., smiling, gestures, changing our voice, and so on) are the exact ones [used] to be immediate.” In this way, humor is an extremely effective tool to build relationships with students.

It is important to note that humor must be used appropriately, and should not be used if it cannot be used effectively. “Students do not find teachers’ use of self-deprecating humor and

humor directed at individual students effective ways to increase learning,” (Wanzer, 2002). Obviously, humor that insults students will come across negatively and will build barriers between teacher and student. Some teachers do believe insulting themselves is safe because they are the ones being put down. However, “self-disparaging humor... could damage one’s credibility,” (Wanzer, 2002), which can decrease the amount of trust students have in their teacher. There are also some people who do not have the ability to use humor effectively. Yet, there is no reason to worry: “they can still increase learning outcomes in the classroom through verbal and nonverbal immediacy behaviors,” (Wanzer, 2002). Humor can be used to achieve immediacy, but immediacy can still be achieved in other ways.

Not only should humor be appropriate, but it should also be relevant for the best effect. It is possible to use irrelevant humor and still be an effective educator, but “related humor [is] the most effective type of humor to use in the classroom,” (Wanzer, 2002). Wanzer (2002) says that this is because students do not have to struggle to connect the joke to the message that the teacher is attempting to get across. Irrelevant humor can be an effective tool in creating rapport in classrooms, but it is not as effective while teaching concepts because it is distracting. However, it does have other uses: “unrelated humor can also be effective in the classroom as an icebreaker or affinity-seeking strategy,” (Wanzer, 2002). In summary, when planning to use humor in the classroom, “make sure that it will be perceived as both funny and nonoffensive” (Wanzer, 2002), in addition to being relevant to the lesson in order to make it the most effective.

### **Relationships through Showing Care**

Showing someone they matter increases their self-esteem and gives them a feeling of importance. The same goes for students; if instructors show students they care, their students will not only have more of a desire to learn, but will also be more capable of learning. Demonstrating

care in the classroom well help students feel capable and lead to more learning gains and a positive environment.

“When students perceive that the adults...do not care about them, they decide not to care what these people think about them,” (Vatterott, 2007). This response leads to apathy from students and may result in discipline issues. Students will be less motivated in a less caring environment, and thus will not perform as well. Unfortunately, “the power imbalance between teachers and students may cause students to believe that their role is to be the passive recipient of the teacher's knowledge,” (Catt et al., 2007). If students feel that their job is simply to sit and receive the expertise from the teacher, the environment does not lend itself to a caring one. They may feel their opinions do not matter and only the teacher is allowed to have new ideas. This feeling may even result in resentment from students who wish to have a significant voice in the classroom.

However, “the teacher who engages in role distance from the traditional definition of powerful and all-knowing scholar and instead assures students of the importance of their questions and ideas creates a social setting that would seem to encourage participation,” (Catt et al., 2007). By showing students their importance, the instructor improves their relationship with them while also improving the quality of learning. Nevertheless, demonstrating to students their opinions matter is not enough. Instructors who show care for their students' well-being also find positive effects. “When teachers communicate in ways to suggest that they care for students' well-being, students report positive affective evaluations for the course and the instructor and high levels of cognitive learning,” (Comadena, Hunt, & Simonds, 2007). These teachers receive better results on classroom material learned in addition to better student satisfaction.

Kim and Thayne (2015) found that “both instructors and students emphasize an instructor’s personal qualities (e.g., being supportive, encouraging, and enthusiastic) and interpersonal support skills (e.g., establishing a friendly atmosphere and making students feel they matter) as equally important as subject matter expertise.” This finding highlights the importance of showing these interpersonal qualities towards students. Demonstrating care also creates a more comfortable environment for students which leads to increased participation. According to Auster and MacRone, “for both men and women [students], the degree of comfort had a significant impact on the level of participation,” (Catt et al., 2007). Feeling comfortable in a classroom also “can create a climate where the students feel more confident in speaking out about their difficulties,” (Comadena et al., 2007). Once students lose the fear of being ridiculed, they are able to reveal their insecurities about the class topic and ask for clarification, which will in turn increase student understanding.

### **Data Collection**

For this research paper, I am use several sources of data. The most vital source of information is my research journal. This includes all notes I took in my observations both at Shortridge High School in Indianapolis, Indiana and Centerville High School in Dayton, Ohio. I noted teacher behavior, student behavior, and the environment of both classrooms and the hallways of Shortridge. I will use an interview I conducted with my Shortridge tutoring partner for ED 228. Lastly, I will utilize data from a panel of Shortridge students.

### **Findings**

Through my observations, I determined four areas which encourage student-teacher relationships. I supported these with academic journals in the literature review section, and in this section I will use my own data to support my claims. I noticed through this research project

that my data confirms the validity of the literature I reviewed. I observed that educational theories covering student-teacher relationships present themselves practically in the field. This observation is reassuring because it gives validity to theories we learn in class. In addition, in the future I will be more open to reading about different educational ideas because I know their relevance in practice. The four areas that inspire student-teacher relationships are as follows: students connect with educators when they are open about themselves, teachers need to be viewed as an ally for students, humor is effective in building relationships, and teachers showing care to students makes them more comfortable and facilitates learning.

### **Open Educators**

Educators that reveal some aspects about themselves and their personal lives connect with students more effectively. Knowledge about a teacher helps students realize they are not so different from themselves. It helps give students something to relate to so they can eventually develop a relationship with their teacher. The Shortridge student I tutored in ED 228 said that his favorite teacher felt “like a friend” and “related” to him. It is rare for this type of rapport to develop if a student knows nothing about a teacher.

It is not necessary for a teacher to reveal everything about themselves. A French teacher at Centerville High School shares that she loves Justin Timberlake, but she does not delve deep into her personal life. Even this small detail allows her students to relate to her as most students know who Justin Timberlake is and may even share her opinion about him. At Shortridge, a social studies teacher is a bit more comfortable with telling his students about other aspects of his life as he told his class about his learning disability. This was not to gain pity from his students, but rather to help them with their own challenges. He continued by saying, “you don’t get Enlightened, you don’t transcend them, you don’t reach nirvana.” This teacher explained how

hard he continues to work to overcome difficulties and connected it back to the class' current topic: religion. The relationship he developed with his students was extremely apparent. The day I observed, they had a class discussion where the entire class was engaged. Everyone participated at least once and almost everyone had something insightful to say.

Building rapport by being open with students definitely increases the overall comfort level of the class. I observed that students seemed more willing to participate when they had a positive relationship with the instructor. The teacher had less difficulties with classroom management and seemed to be working with their students rather than against them.

### **Instructor as an Ally**

Students in high school possess many challenges already built into their class schedule. For their students to learn, teachers need to be an ally for their students, not an additional problem. Proving this camaraderie can range from allowing food to be made and eaten in class to posting assignments ahead of time. What is important is the relationship that evolves when the teacher demonstrates that they want their students to succeed.

A French teacher at Centerville High School tells her students exactly what will be on their test from the first day of the unit. They know exactly what grammar they need to understand, what vocabulary they will need to use, and even what the essay question will be. This tactic removes anxiety from the students as to what will be on the test allowing them to focus on what they need to learn. She gives her students homework the night before the test as a way to "force studying." With every test she gives online extra credit for an automatic five points. While some teachers may condemn how much help this French teacher gives to her students, it is most certainly effective. Her students do not have to worry about their grades if they use all of her help. They still have to know the grammar and vocabulary, but they do not

need to be concerned about how they will be presented on the test. As a result, students react quite positively towards this teacher.

An English teacher at Shortridge accounted for the amount of homework he knows students receive for other classes. Before fall break, he told his students they would have a test their first day back. However, he gave students everything they would need to complete it over the two week break. They could turn it in whenever they wanted, and use the 90 minute class period designated for the exam to do work for other classes. Students received the option to not have homework over break or to get ahead in the class. The teacher demonstrated he wants his students to succeed while also allowing them to make the choice for themselves.

High school is difficult enough without having to worry about a teacher that seems to have no regard for the complexity of what is being learned. Students will certainly feel more positively towards a teacher that helps them succeed.

### **Humor and Teacher-Student Relationships**

Humor, when used effectively, is at the very least a way to interest a class. While it may not hold their attention, it is a stepping stone for lasting engagement. It also possesses a variety of uses in the classroom. Besides engagement, it can help students learn information and can even contribute to classroom management.

Using humor does not just indicate telling jokes to the classroom. Sometimes just being energetic is enough to be funny and engage students at the same time. According to the panel of Shortridge students, teachers engage students just by being excited about what they are teaching. While it is not exactly humor, energy still grabs their attention. A math teacher engages his students by using humor as well. He pulls up a picture of a graph of a parabola and says, “We

have these, one of the most beautiful, satisfying shapes you will ever see.” All of the students laughed, but the talking that was going on before was stopped.

The Centerville High School French teacher uses humor to help her students remember information. To help teach vocabulary, she makes a PowerPoint presentation with pictures of the words. For “se maquiller,” meaning to put on makeup, she used a picture of a cartoon woman with way too much makeup on. She told me that she purposely finds funny pictures so students are able to recall vocabulary easier. This teacher also explains exceptions in French grammar using humor as well: “Les mains (the hands) not tes mains (your hands). You can’t own your body parts in French.” While it is a bizarre statement, it definitely helps the students. I still remember this rule from when I was in her class five years ago because of how she taught it to us.

One of the English teachers at Shortridge manages a particularly rowdy class by telling jokes that relate to the class’ interests. While trying to explain an assignment, he noticed some people not paying attention. To get them back on track, he compared the assignment to social media by saying, “be quiet before I Facebook you,” followed by “when you Instagram your Snapchat.” The entire class started yelling at him for incorrectly using the social media, but this method succeeded. Once the uproar subsided, there was no more talking.

### **Relationships through Showing Care**

When teachers and schools make their priority all students, relationships are built and learning takes place. No one wants to be in a place where they feel they do not matter and the same goes for school. Students will not want to attend school if they feel their presence is unimportant. That is why showing care is possibly one of the most vital ways relationships are built.

Shortridge itself does a phenomenal job of making sure student needs are met. A uniform is required, but in “The Shoppe,” students are able to purchase any item of the uniform for \$1. They do not have to worry about being punished for not obeying the dress code so they can worry about school. The principal of Shortridge, affectionately called O’day, believes “good education is good for all kids.” In a district with a lower socioeconomic level, this attitude is imperative. The four students of the panel even said that Shortridge cares for its students. If the school and the principal both show they care for their students, teachers will most likely act the same. Dr. Jackson, a Spanish teacher and assistant principal, said, “how you speak to students is most important.” Teachers should never yell if there is a discipline problem; they should have a conversation with the students to figure out what is going on. She says that the first connection with students is to know names. This shows them they are important to the teacher and makes them feel they matter.

According to the panel of students, the only real discipline problem is people losing focus because of the difficulty of the workload. Students are not acting out for attention or because they do not care. Teachers help their students by telling them to stand up and walk around, or check Instagram or Facebook. The fact that the only real discipline problems are due to the amount of work speaks volumes. That means the work is challenging, but the environment is positive.

### **Conclusion**

Looking at student-teacher relationships will help me immensely as a future educator. I observed a variety of ways to connect with students and I have a clear idea of which ways work well and which ways are not as effective. Future researchers can continue this research by observing the relationship building that occurs on the first day of school. They could also

continue the study of how positive relationships influence classroom management. Through this project I learned incredibly important things, but the most important thing is this: in order to build effective relationships with students, you have to be yourself. I have many examples of ways to build rapport with students, but now I have to figure out which ways work the best for myself. As I move forward in the College of Education, I want to explore how *I* can most effectively build positive student-teacher relationships.

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