

Building Rapport In the Era of Online Teaching



By: Peter Paccone, with help from Carlo Juntilla

Though most teachers probably wouldn't agree on how best to define the word rapport, they surely would agree that rapport is needed for students and teachers to give it their best AND for students and teachers to avoid burnout.

Most teachers also would probably agree that each of the below represents a great way to build rapport.

- Greet students at the door with a smile
- Learn student names as quickly as possible
- Create classroom norms with your students help
- Ask rapport building questions
- Share something personal with your students
- Go to school events/sponsor a club
- Allow students to occupy your classroom at lunch
- Celebrate your students' successes and their uniqueness

But how to do the above when called upon to teach online? It's no doubt more challenging than face to face.

As pointed out in a Forbes 2018 Forbes article entitled [How to Build Real Relationships in the Virtual World](#), "it's harder to connect on a human level with people when they exist in two dimensions on your computer screen or mobile device. You need to work extra hard to make sure you're interacting in a way that allows you to build genuine, meaningful relationships."

To find out how to do a better job of building rapport in the era of online teaching, I've not only sought out the opinion of many experienced and highly acclaimed online teacher-leaders (several of whom are teachers in my district), I've also field-tested some of their better suggestions over the course of the past several years.

Below, my findings on how best to build rapport in the era of online teaching.

Greet Students at the Online Door with at Least a Smile.

Above all else, this means changing (if you haven't yet done so) your online profile pic to one of you smiling.

- [Google Classroom: Change Your Profile Picture](#) (Teacher Tech with Alice Keeler, March 2020)
- [Power of the 'Profile Pic' in Online Learning](#) (Online Learning Insights, June 2020)
- [The Research & Science Behind Finding Your Best Profile Picture](#) (Buffer Library, March 2020)

Additionally, this means being sure to log into your class at least five-to-ten minutes before the start of every class; then cheerfully greeting each student as they join.

Also consider starting off every class with some kind of upbeat, positive, and welcoming language . . . maybe even employing the same kind of language before every class.

One experienced online teacher-leader I know has even suggested that when trying to craft this kind of language, think in terms of Vince Scully, the pleasant and eloquent, Hall of Fame play-by-play voice of the Los Angeles Dodger.

“Vinney” would start off every Dodger game by saying “Hello everybody and a very pleasant good evening to you wherever you may be,” arguably the greatest 14 words any Dodger fan ever heard.

In other words, what I’m wondering here is what 14 words will you use to start your class off with and to what extent do you think these 14 words will help to build rapport?

As for me, I’m still working on it. Just can’t settle on anything worth sharing though determined to keep after it. I think it’s important.

But I also think it’s important, in the era of online teaching, to go way beyond a smile and a 14 word opening.

As one experienced online teacher recently said to me: “For those of us called upon to teach online in the fall, we will need to keep in mind that for the first time in history, if only because we are now too viewed daily on television, computer, and cell phone screens not only by our students but also by their parents and siblings, we will now all be judged by a higher standard . . . the standard of professional newscasters, weather reporters, and/or sports reporters. We therefore have to do more, come across better, in terms of our presentation, appearance, and demeanor. Like it or not, that’s the new reality.”

Learn the Names of Your Online Students as Quickly as Possible.

To do this, one teacher I know will start off the year by asking each student to say her or his name as she or he walks into his online classroom, if only so that he can hear it and repeat it; thereby being able to match name to face and voice faster. This teacher friend of mine simply believes that doing this will help to build rapport better, faster.

- [Tips for Learning Students' Names](#) (Carnegie Mellon University Eberly Center, June 2020)
- [How to Remember Students' Names](#) (Edutopia, August 2014)

Digitally Create Community Norms With Your Students Help

To build community norms in a digital classroom, I recommend Padlet or Google Docs. They can be utilized as a place for students to collectively share

their ideas on norms and come to a consensus. Having this as a shared project helps students feel part of a classroom community, especially if the teacher ensures all students are able to contribute.

Norms should reflect universal classroom expectations while also meeting the demands of a digital classroom. For example, the idea of “one-mic, one-voice” can be elaborated to include muting oneself on Zoom if they are not speaking. These norms should be reviewed in every class session so they become routine. Students can reflect on their weekly commitment and comment on their effectiveness using a tool like Google Forms survey or a SurveyMonkey that can serve as an exit ticket. By giving students this opportunity to have agency in establishing norms creates a culture of agency and collaboration.

It’s important to remember that during these unprecedented times, norms should be malleable in order to address unexpected circumstances. Students should continue to have agency in shaping the classroom environment. One teaching strategy I like to use is the “Parking Lot” where students can write down and post any questions or thoughts to be revisited as a class at a later time. While we cannot recreate the physical parking lot, Padlet offers educators the ability to offer a space for students to post their thoughts onto a shared document.

- [Creating a Classroom Parking Lot](#) (Belolan, September 2013)
- [How to Collaborate Using Google Docs](#) (Zapier, March 2019)
- [Padlet as a Collaboration Tool](#) (Padlet, 2020)
- [Setting Community Agreement Activities](#) (National School REform Faculty, Spring 2014)

Use Online Class Time to Ask Rapport Building Questions

I’ve never been one to spend much time asking students in class to answer these kinds of questions, but I decided to go down this path after having received some encouragement from one of my more talented and trusted colleagues and after having read about the need for doing this kind of work in the era of online teaching.

In any event, this summer, while teaching a six week, four hour per day, 100% online US History course, I asked my students the rapport building questions appearing below.

- Rank your interest in taking this class on a scale of 1-10
- Rank your speaking skills on a scale of 1-10
- Rank your writing skills on a Scale of 1-10
- What's your favorite subject?
- Describe your profile picture?
- Would you rather be the first person to explore a planet or be the inventor of a drug that cures a deadly disease?
- Would you rather lose the ability to read or lose the ability to speak?
- Would you rather always be 10 minutes late or always be 20 minutes early?
- Would you rather spend the rest of your life with a sailboat as your home or an RV as your home?
- Would you rather be an average person in the present or a king of a large country 2500 years ago?
- Would you rather be forced to dance every time you heard music or be forced to sing along to any song you heard?

Some of these questions, I asked at the start of class. Others, at the end of class.

Most often, I asked students to answer these questions in a Google Form, though on occasion, I would ask them to answer these questions either via Flipgrid or while appearing on camera live.

From this, I learned much of value about each of my students.

I also learned much of value from these two articles.

- [20 Questions to Get Kids Talking & Build Community](#) (Differentiated Teaching, 2020)
- [The Best Questions to use of Class Closing Activities](#) Larry Ferlazzo, September 2013)

Below, some other great online-class rapport building questions, though more complex than the straightforward questions appearing above.

- **Two Truths and a Lie:** “This game is a popular ice breaker for many groups. Each person tells two true things and one that is a lie. Each thing either needs to be reasonably believable or all sound unbelievable. This game is easy to adapt to your classroom as well. You could make it two lies and a truth or three truths and two lies. Adapt

this game to meet your time and classroom needs. The person with the most incorrect guesses is the winner. You might offer them extra points or a virtual high five for winning.”

- **Appreciation, Apology, Aha.** A strategy for building — and maintaining — a healthy, supportive classroom culture built by the folks at Edutopia that provides students with a chance to reflect on their time and learning and choose from there options to write about: something or someone they appreciate from class, something they want to apologize for, or an "aha" moment from their learning.
- **Help to Tell A Story.** Students build a story one sentence at a time. The teacher begins by giving the opening line. Each student adds another line to the story. The rules are that the next line has to make sense.
- **Rose and Thorn:** In this quick activity, students participate by sharing roses—something positive going on for a student that day—and thorns, which are negative, or at least less than positive. Students can choose their level of vulnerability: A rose can simply be “the weather is nice today.” A low-stakes thorn might be “I feel tired.” Yet many students choose to share more personal items: “My rose is that even though I’m stressed out, I got all my homework done” or “My thorn is that my dog is sick and I’m really worried about her.” Going around the classroom, each student states one rose and one thorn. I share mine too. The whole process takes five minutes or less. Yet though this fast activity may seem simple, the rose and thorn check-in is an essential part of my classroom community-building.
- **What’s Your Favorite Animal?** Here students are not only to answer the question directly but to explain why, be sure to include in their explanation two adjectives that describe their favorite animals. The students' answer to this question, according to a Stanford University Psychology professor, reveals how the student wants to be seen by others.
- **What’s Your Favorite Color?** Here, as with the preceding rapport building questions, students are again called upon to answer the question directly and to provide their reasoning, being sure to work into their explanation two adjectives if possible . . . with the students answer to this question revealing how the student views him/herself.

Share Something Personal

Most online teacher-leaders I know say that since rapport building in the era of online teaching will prove more challenging, teachers should, in an attempt to build rapport, increasingly share personal stories with their students.

If that's true, what one story, more than any other, do you plan to share about yourself and that you think helps to build rapport?

As for me, I'm normally not one to share the personal, but if pushed, I'd have to say the story that I share and think is mostly likely to build rapport is the story of how and/why I stand and say the pledge. It all has to do with a camping, cross-country car trip that started hours after my last high school final exam, ended ten weeks later, and included no one else but my two younger brothers, one a high school junior and the other a middle school seventh grader.

If you are one to share something personal, or if you are now planning, perhaps for the first time, to share something personal, here's a question that's generated much discussion lately.

Do you think personal sharing is something to plan for or is it something that should be allowed to develop organically?

As one talented teacher I know has said "Connecting with kids should be an intuitive process for those who really enjoy working with/teaching children. In other words, if building rapport is challenging for someone and it becomes this calculated, not only would I argue they're doing it wrong, but that kids will see right through them.

Another teacher I know even went on to say "What I chose to tell comes up organically, based on our conversations . . . I can't plan that sort of thing. No one should plan this sort of thing. It should all be about authenticity. Sharing the personal with kids should never be planned. It should always arise organically in the context of an authentic student relationship."

Regardless, if you do decide to share the personal, you'll need to decide on what you want to share, when you want to share, the extent to which the sharing should relate to the content and/or skills that you teach, and perhaps most importantly how do you want to share? Will it be Via Zoom or Google Meet, Flipgrid, Twitter, Facebook, a blog post, or in some other way?.

- [How will you tell your students about You?](#) (National Geographic Education Blog, 2020)

- [Making it Personal in the Classroom](#) (Teaching Channel, 2020)

Go to Online School Events/Sponsor an Online Club

The era of online teaching will not mean the end of school related events and or clubs. School events and student clubs will continue.

True, they may continue in a different form, and maybe even only online, but they will continue. My mock trial club, for example, will certainly continue, though 100% online and vastly different from anything that any of us have ever experienced before.

In other words, in the era of online learning , students will certainly be tempted to publish an ever increasing number of videos to youtube. Their performances, for sure. Their plays, concerts, cheerleading activities, etc. This coming year, I plan to watch as many of these as possible; then follow up by email with words of congratulations to the students who appeared in these videos and that I know, if only to build rapport

I may even agree to sponsor a club. I can only imagine the kinds of “online” clubs that will develop in the era of online teaching..

Celebrate All of Your Students’ Successes and Uniqueness Online

One great way to do this is to create a Facebook Group that can be viewed publicly but that only your students can join. Since school shut down March 13, I’ve done just that. I call it [Titans Got Talent](#). My school, San Marino High School, is the home of the Titans and on this Facebook Group I provide all San Marino High School students (teachers, admins, and staff too) with an opportunity to showcase their “good work.”

This work could certainly include a performance of some kind. Also something baked, drawn, or written. Maybe even an artistic work or a speech. This work could also include any school-related work.

Another great way to celebrate your student’s successes online is to interview your students; then post in either the form of a youtube video or a podcast.

Since school shutdown on March 13, fellow SMHS social studies teacher Andrew Gayl and I have been doing this in the form of what we call a Titan

Talk. Below, two good examples.

- [The Craig McLaren Swan Titan Talk Interview](#): Craig is a San Marino High School junior and in this podcast, he tells us about his plans for rebuilding a used Mazda Miata, purchased shortly after school shut down March 13.
- [The Calvin Ryan Titan Talk Interview](#): Calvin is a San Marino High School junior and someone who for the past nine months (and ever since school shutdown on March 13), has been working at the Alhambra Store 121 In-N-Out. In this Titan Talk, Calvin describes how he got the job, what it's been like working for In-N-Out during this age of social distancing, and what he has done with the money he's earned.

One more thing you can do if you want to celebrate your students' successes online is to think in terms of football helmet stickers. In other words, consider digitally awarding students who in any way succeed online, just as football coaches award helmet stickers to those who have played well. Then record these stickers on a Google Sheet, with all students in the class being able to view the Sheet.

Sure, the “stickers” are meaningless, for they won't at the end of the term be translated into any kind of grade, but your students (like most football players) will surely work hard to earn them, even if they can be only digitally applied. Mine surely do.

If the above seems all too complicated, too time consuming, then I suggest simply looking back to your students' rapport building answers.

In other words, as suggested by another teacher I know, consider the rapport that you can build if you were to somehow message your students as appears below:

- Soomin, I remember you saying at the beginning of the year that you didn't like to talk in class, so I can only imagine how challenging it was for you to have participated as you did during class discussion yesterday. Regardless, you sure expressed yourself well.
- Linda, I've noticed that you've been on time to class for the last two weeks, though I remember you saying earlier in the year that you didn't have much interest in this class. I appreciate the effort.
- Jose, At the beginning of the you said that, on a scale of 1-10, you give yourself a 3 in terms of your writing. That score suggests you don't think

much of your writing, yet from what I've seen, I think you should be giving yourself a much higher score. I've been doing this job for many years and can assure you. You are a very good writer.

- Casey, A while back, you said that you would rather be the inventor of a drug that finds a cure for a deadly disease than the first person to explore a planet. And to explain, you said "Finding a cure for a virus would be an amazing accomplishment that will benefit mankind around the world. but exploring a planet would most likely lead to the conquering and killing of the inhabitants of that planet" and you "wanted nothing to do with that." Wow. Now I understand why you so often take, whatever opportunity you've been given in class, to turn your attention/focus to something having to do with medicine, doctors, health, and the betterment of mankind.
- Carlo, Remember how at the beginning of the year you said that your favorite animal was the elephant because it was "friendly and amazing." Well, over the course of the past few months, friendly and amazing is certainly how I would describe you in this class."
- Ryan, Whenever I have given you a chance to explain your thinking to some question I have asked, I always find myself wanting to describe your answer as plain and simply, yet powerful and persuasive. No wonder at the beginning of the year you described your favorite color as plain and simple, yet powerful and persuasive. That's you!

Allow Your Online Students to Come into Your Room at Lunch

If in the fall you are required to offer up regularly scheduled office hours and, in doing so, you continue to think of your office hour setting as a place for test prep or where you can help students with an assignment, chances are no one will show. But can you blame them? Test prep? Help with an assignment? During shutdown and at a prescribed time of the day? Who needs to attend a regularly scheduled office hour for something like that when a student can reach out to a teacher, via email, any time of the day. The concept of the traditional office hour just seems so outdated!

My suggestion - reimagine your office hour setting as a place to offer your students the equivalent of what many teachers offer their students at lunch on a rainy day. In other words, think of all the good that might follow if you were to invite your students, during your office hour, to do any of the following.

- Share a favorite stay at home coping strategy

- Share a favorite song, painting, work of art, poem, etc.
- Discuss an all-important, school-related question (what should school look like after school reopens, should teachers require students to present on camera, how should teachers hold students accountable for class discussion).
- Share something baked or otherwise created.
- Share a talent (the playing of a musical instrument)
- Invite a guest speaker (your students favorite middle school teacher, for example) to meet with your students.

Sure. If you give this a go, not every student will show. On the other hand, if my experience is any guide, you'll have more students showing than you can imagine. Plus those who do show will let you know clearly and without hesitation that they enjoyed your modern online twist to the traditional office hour offering.

Final Thoughts

Somewhere online, an educator recently said that "in the era of online teaching there will be no personal interaction between student and teacher . . . the spontaneity of teaching is lost . . . the only rapport that will exist will exist only in the exchanging of bits and bytes of info."

I certainly don't agree with what this educator is claiming and my guess is that most teachers also take great issue with the above.

On the other hand, rapport building is "a tricky thing to understand," as properly claimed in an article entitled [Rapport-Building: Creating Positive Emotional Contexts for Enhancing Teaching and Learning](#).

My point in bringing this forward - I'm certain that what I've presented in this post will in no way prove exhaustive.

In other words, there's certainly much more that we can do; things that I should have but failed to include in this post, and so if you wish to comment on something presented above or if you have something new to offer, I would very much like to hear from you.

To get the feedback ball rolling, I'd like to now introduce you to Carlo Juntilla.

He is 24 years old, grew up in the state of Washington, received his undergraduate degree from Gonzaga University (Political Science) in 2018, received his social studies teaching credential from Loyola Marymount University (LMU) in 2019, and finished up his masters degree in Education Policy from LMU in 2020.

From 2018 to 2020, he served as a Teach for America Corps Member, and this past summer worked as an intern for the George Lucas Educational Foundation (GLEF). While at GLEF, he wrote several articles.

- [Using PBL as a Tool for Engagement](#)
- [Building Classroom Culture Remotely](#)
- [Addressing Social & Emotional Learning in a Distance Classroom](#)

And since completing his internship, Carlo has worked with me to get this post ready for publication.

In all, I've learned this about him. He's a very talented writer, has great passion for teaching, and can be counted on to give serious thought to any/all questions related to teaching, learning, testing, and wellness.

Question:

Carlo, given your background and age, I'm assuming that you have already spent many hours learning about how best to build rapport with your students?

Yes, rapport building and creating meaningful relationships are essential to my teaching practice. It's for this reason that I show up as my authentic self in the classroom and advocate for my students to do the same in order for us to really know each other!

Question:

Do you agree with those who say that teachers should never plan to share a personal story . . . that stories like this should always arise organically?"

So much of what motivated me to become a teacher in the first place comes from my personal experiences with education. I think that it would be a disservice to my students if they didn't get a chance to know more of my personal story and why I care about teaching. I've noticed that when I share glimpses of my own story, my students listen intently with curiosity. When I let students know of my mistakes and hardships, it helps them understand that it's okay to have flaws and imperfections.

Question:

Regarding the point I made about the sharing of personal stories to build rapport? What one story, more than any other, do you plan to share about yourself and that you think helps to build rapport?

I like to share a story with my students of when I was misdiagnosed as an English Language Learner while in primary school. As a young student, I was pulled away from my peers for a few hours each day in order to “learn English”, despite English being my first and only language. This set me back academically for several years and empowered me to speak up for my education. The experience of being labeled incorrectly pushes me to create a classroom environment where my students feel comfortable and confident in advocating for their needs.

Question:

Is there anything in this post that was new for you and that you would be tempted to give a try in the fall, assuming you end up teaching at a school where you need to meet with the kids online?

One of my favorite things about teaching in person is the opportunity to greet students at the door before coming to class. These few seconds to exchange smiles or to have a quick check-in can be powerful in developing strong relationships. I’m excited to experiment with fun profile pictures to humanize the teacher behind the Zoom or Google Classroom icon.

Something I want to try is to actually greet students 1:1 on Zoom before class begins! Zoom has a feature to keep participants in a waiting room before joining. Each student can be let in one by one, so I plan on saying “hello” to each student when they enter my “online door”.

Question:

Is there anything that you think I should have added to this post?”

Something that I want to explore is the potential of Project-Based Learning (PBL) as a tool to build community online. PBL is a student-centered pedagogy that promotes learning through an exploration of real-world challenges. PBL is built on collaborative projects that give students and educators opportunities to work as a team towards a common learning goal. I think PBL has the opportunity to increase engagement both online and in person.

Question:

Assuming you're assigned to teach an APGov online course in the fall, what 14 words will you use to start your class off with and to what extent do you think these 14 words will help to build rapport?

"The secret to succeeding this special school year is to work and learn together." By being vulnerable, I create opportunities for me and my students to make mistakes. If I am to teach digitally in the fall, I truly believe that I will be learning alongside my students in identifying the best ways to teach. I believe that stressing that we're in this together will lead to deeper relationships and greater trust in one another.

Question

Do you agree with those who say that teachers, in the era of online teaching, will be held to a higher standard, such as the one that professional newscasters, weather reporters, and/or sports reporters are held to?

Whether students and educators return to school physically, or are stuck at home with virtual learning, teachers have a responsibility to attend to the academic and social emotional needs of our students. Educators already can't control the conditions of their students' homes. So now more than ever, teachers deserve grace in order for them to address the needs of their students. Providing a safe outlet for students to have a sense of belongingness, especially in this moment, can mean more than we'll ever know, and should be respected.

Question

To what extent if any do you agree with those who say that in the era of online teaching there will be no personal interaction between students and the teacher . . . the spontaneity of teaching is lost . . . the only rapport that will exist will exist only in the exchanging of bits and bytes of info."

Prior to COVID, apps like TikTok and Instagram were competitions for my students' attention in my face-to-face classroom. Now I'm using this moment as an opportunity to lean into the fact that this generation of students are mostly digital natives. Our students are constantly using the internet to share their stories and learn about others. In order for students to get to know each other, I'm considering giving them the opportunity to personalize Google Slides, YouTube Videos, or classroom-specific social media pages where students can introduce themselves in a way that is unique to them. This would give my students the chance to "meet" their peers beyond the scope

of their Zoom icons. This also gives me the opportunity to share my story in a personalized way!

Question

Anything you want to say in closing?

While we all plan to return to school in the fall, I want to make myself available to you! My email is Carlo.Juntilla@glef.org. I am more than happy to discuss content, PBL strategies, or to answer questions or concerns you may have as we navigate this new chapter in education together.