Instructor and Students' Attitudes towards Rapport Building in Online Courses

by

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Abstract

This study explores what rapport building practices online instructors implement and what are the attitudes of post-secondary students towards rapport building with the instructor and other students in an online environment. How post-secondary students value rapport building with instructors or fellow students in online courses was also studied.

The research population for this study was students and faculty at a technical institute in Western Canada. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with two students and one instructor with experience in online courses. The research participants were asked about their personal experiences and attitudes towards relationship building in online courses. The participants were also asked to compare their online courses experience to that with their face to face course experience.

The findings from this study were consistent that found in prior studies on rapport building in online courses. The instructor and students had positive attitudes towards developing rapport in the online environment, although rapport between student and instructor was perceived to be more important than that between students. Rapport building activities were more common at the start of the semester in online courses.

Synchronous video was used to promote discussions in the class but tools such as Google Hangouts or Skype might be more convenient and easier to use for building rapport between students or between students and instructors.

Key words: rapport, online courses, postsecondary students, post-secondary instructors, student attitudes, instructor attitudes, relationship building, Moodle.

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Disclaimer

The views expressed in this capping project are those of the author and do not reflect the views of NAIT, the University of Alberta, the Faculty of Extension, or the Communications and Technology Graduate Program.

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Introduction

In the summer of 2012, I embarked on a new educational journey. I was considering enrolling in a master's program at the University of Alberta and decided to take a course through open studies. I thought this would be a good way to test whether I was prepared to go back to school.

I was planning to work towards a degree in the Communications and Technology Graduate Program (MACT) so the course I was taking was an elective for the program. The course was delivered mainly online which was also completely new to me as a learner.

The course started at the beginning of July, but I decided to look into the course early. After logging in, I was instantly thrown into Moodle, the online course platform which was completely unknown to me. I had no idea how the course would work but I expected that the experience would be self-directed with the lecture and notes posted for me online to access with no student or instructor interaction.

I was surprised several days before the course started when the instructor contacted me through email to welcome me personally to the course. She knew I was not part of the MACT program and wanted to make sure I was comfortable before we started. I found her manner kind and reassuring, and as a result I felt a bit more confident about the course.

With my new confidence I familiarized myself with the Moodle environment and started my online readings. I was a bit concerned about the course since I was on vacation and was travelling with limited internet access. I assumed it was unlikely anyone would notice. After all, we were not in a face to face course with someone taking attendance.

I was surprised again when I did get back online that there was another email from my instructor. She had noticed I did not log in the first couple of days and was concerned that I was confused or had technical issues. I assured her that I was fine, thanked her for her concern and logged into the course to see what I had missed.

Since my last login, we had been given our first assignment. We were expected to share a personal story relating to the overall course topic. The instructor had started off the forum with a personal story about her family. I was surprised but pleased how open and candid she was with her story. It set the tone for the other tales shared by myself and my classmates. It also reinforced my initial positive feelings towards my instructor.

One of the first things I noticed about my classmates was that I was one of the few who did not know anyone else. Based on their posts in the introduction forum we were expected to provide, many of the students were from the cohort which had started the MACT program that year and had likely met face to face during the Spring Institute. I knew the MACT program started each year with three weeks of face to face courses which brought all of the students of that current cohort together. I could also sense by their personal comments to each other in our class posts that many of them were friends.

My next challenge with online learning was with a group assignment. I was to partner with another student to produce an audiovisual project. This presented me with two problems. I knew no one in the class and I had no idea what technology to use. Now not only was I trying to manage being back in school and learning online for the first time, I also needed to learn how to use some sort of multimedia software. Fortunate for me, I got lucky on both accounts. My first break came when another student who also knew no one else in the course asked me to be her

partner. Then my multimedia problem turned out to be less of an issue than expected. Between

my partner and me, we were able to teach ourselves to create a PowerPoint presentation with

voiceover.

By the end of the semester, I was able to stumble through the course successfully. I

applied to the MACT program, got accepted, and continued on with my online course journey as

a student.

At this time, things were changing at the institute where I was an instructor. Despite the

majority of courses still offered face to face, online delivery was expanding. Academic staff were

also being trained in the use of Moodle to introduce a blended learning environment to the face

to face classroom. Many programs were modifying traditional face to face courses for online

delivery.

My education and work environment were colliding in an unexpected way. I now had

experience on both sides of the online course platform Moodle. At work I had the opportunity to

develop and deliver an online course for my program. This provided an interesting situation. I

experienced the online course environment as both a student and educator. I felt the frustration as

a student of having an instructor who was not engaged as well as I had students who did not

participate in my own courses. I assigned group work, as an instructor, as well as complained

about my own group members as I completed my own projects, as a student.

I had wonderful experiences as a student with engaged and caring instructors as well as

took courses with instructors who never provided feedback. This led to a questioning of my

abilities as an instructor in the online environment. I experienced wonderful rapport with other

students and instructors who I never met face to face. This had contributed to an unexpected yet

more enjoyable learning experience. The online courses where the instructor was either absent or unresponsive or fellow students were unfriendly, contributed to less satisfying courses.

I was fascinated by this difference as I had initially assumed the online course environment would be impersonal, distant and with communication only one way. Similar to the way I imagined learning by mail correspondence had been at one time. That led me to choose to study rapport building in the online course environment. I wanted to both educate myself and assist my fellow instructors on how to best provide a successful online course experience.

Background

Online learning has been part of post-secondary education for over a decade. Online courses offer flexibility to instructors and students alike, allowing individuals to be anywhere in the world while still being part of a class.

Despite their success, online courses have their own challenges. Research indicates that student attrition rates remain higher for online courses when compared to face to face courses. The rates of students who do not finish online courses "range from as low as 10% to as high as 50% to 75%" (Croxton, 2014, p.314).

The potentially low retention of online students is a costly concern for post-secondary administrators (Hachey, Wladis & Conway, 2013). Reducing attrition rates requires identifying the reasons for students not finishing online courses. According to Croxton (2014) there can be many factors which affect student attrition. There are external factors including finances, time and family pressures, as well as internal factors such as personal motivation and self-regulation. In post-secondary education the learning environment also plays a role in student retention. In

online learning these factors include technology issues, lack of instructor presence and lack of

interactivity (Croxton, 2014).

Although all of these influences are important to student retention, this paper focuses on

some of the social elements in the online learning environment by examining rapport. The role of

rapport building in online courses will be examined. This exploratory research study plans to

examine how both post-secondary students and an instructor value similar rapport building

techniques in an online environment. Exploring the preferences for rapport building of post-

secondary students can help institutions determine if rapport building can enhance the online

course experience and it so, how.

Literature Review

This literature review examines recent research in the area of building rapport in the online classroom. For the purpose of this study the term rapport is defined as building personal connections between instructor and students as well as between students. To explore the attitudes of instructors and students towards rapport building in the online environment it is important to study online learning, rapport, its role in education and rapport building. It is also important to understand the types of interactions which occur in the classroom. Through examining the literature other key topics that emerged were; instructors attitudes towards rapport, students attitudes and expectation towards rapport, and technology's effect on building rapport.

Online Learning Background

The online learning environment is continually changing. Literature pertaining to distance learning written between about 2000 and 2010 often described online instruction as an emerging field (Anagnostopoulos, Basmadjian & McCrory, 2005; Liu, Bonk, Magjuka, Lee and Su, 2005; Stodel, Thompson & MacDonald, 2006). Although online education had been studied since the 1980's (e.g., Swanson, 1982) it was still seen as a new learning experience (Sher, 2009). More recent literature discusses online learning as "holding a major place in higher learning" (Croxton, 2014, p. 214) yet it is still new to many postsecondary instructors.

Currently, almost seventy percent of American academic leadership believe that online learning is an important part of their long term planning (Allen & Seaman, 2013). As a result, there is pressure on programs and faculty to provide more online course offerings (Easton, 2003). Pressure for more online courses may also be in response to student interest. According to

Babson Survey Research Group, nearly one third of post-secondary students in the United States have taken an online course (as cited in Allen & Seaman, 2011).

Meeting this demand from administration and students may be difficult for faculty. Transitioning from the face to face environment to an exclusively online environment can be challenging for instructors (Delahunty, Verenikina & Jones, 2014; Easton, 2003; Liu et al., 2005). Certain courses are not ideal candidates for online delivery, and those that are potentially appropriate require a new mindset for the planning and adaptation for the "different pedagogical requirements for online learning" (Delahunty, Verenikina & Jones, 2014, p.252). Ideally, online instruction is not recording a lecture and merely posting it online (Easton, 2003). As Delahunty, Verenikina and Jones (2014) posit, "appropriate online pedagogic practices are not neatly transferrable from traditional approaches" (p. 244). More detailed and elaborate methods are required to effectively communicate material online in comparison to sharing information in a face to face classroom (Liu et al., 2005). The learning experience is different; therefore the material and delivery must evolve for the environment as well.

In addition to adapting course material, understanding the learner, their expectations and their perceptions of their online learning experience are important points to consider when designing for the online environment (Deggs, Grover & Kacirek, 2010; Dobbs, Waid & del Carmen, 2009). In an effort to retain students as well motivate them to consider more online courses, the students' needs and expectations must be considered just as they would in a face to face environment (Kilic-Cakmak, Karatas & Ocak, 2009).

Identifying the social needs and expectations of students might be a step towards improving the social factors which affect student success. The establishment of a caring and

open environment might help develop open communication among learners and instructors in the face to face classroom as well as in online courses. Reducing this gap by developing rapport and having open dialog can help educators learn what students need. When trying to build rapport, the lack of face to face interaction in online courses might add additional challenges.

In their study "Rapport: Its Relation to Student Attitudes and Behaviours towards Teachers and Classes" Benson, Cohen & Buskist (2005) surveyed undergraduate students at an American university to determine instructor behaviours and attitudes related to building rapport. Rapport-inducing qualities were identified including promoting class discussion, approachability and concern for students. It was determined through the study that rapport building was positively related to student enjoyment of the instructor and the class. Additionally, building rapport resulted in increased student motivation.

Interaction in the Online Classroom

Moore (2005) explains that a transactional distance exists in a distance learning environment since students and instructors might not interact concurrently or in the same physical space. Efforts must be made to minimize this distance between the learner and the instructor. In any distance learning environment there must be three types of interaction for learning to occur (Moore, 2005). These are:

- Student-content interaction
- Student-instructor interaction
- Student-student interaction

The first, student-content interaction, involves the student interacting with the course material (Sher, 2009). In a face to face course this can be the course text book, course packs or

notes provided by the instructor. In the online learning environment these items may also be available but may also include the material provided by the instructor though the web based medium such as links to videos or online articles.

Student-instructor interaction is any communication which occurs between the instructor and student. This can be through instructor led means such as a lecture, individual or class wide discussions or text based means such as email. It can also be student initiated through asking questions or initiating class discussion. Interaction between learner and instructor does not need to be course related nor structured. Student-instructor interaction has been linked to increased student satisfaction and student learning (Sher, 2009). This interaction may be synchronous (e.g., face to face conservation) or asynchronous (e.g., email messaging) (Burnett, Bonnici, Miksa & Kim, 2007). In a face to face course, the student-instructor interaction often occurs face to face directly, and synchronously, since the learner and instructor are required to be in the same place, at the same time during the class.

In the online environment, synchronous student-instructor interaction may occur if set up by the instructor. Much of the communication between the instructor and learners is instructor led, due to the instructor controlling the medium in which the students and the instructor 'meet' for the course. Unless the student contacts the instructor directly, the instructor might only provide course related information and may request written comments or posts from students as part of the course requirements. In this situation, if an instructor desires to build rapport with students synchronously, he or she need to learn how to do this in the chosen environment.

Student-student communication takes place between students and may or may not involve the instructor (Sher, 2009). This interaction can be initiated by the instructor, for

example, through group assignments and discussion forums or may be student initiated. Again

this may involve synchronous or asynchronous communication (Burnett et al., 2007). All of

these interactions may occur in the face to face or online course environment. Developing

relationships among learners in face to face classrooms and online learning environments may

help students meet course outcomes and decrease attrition (Murdock & Williams, 2011). The

online environment provides an additional challenge of limiting spontaneous communication

between students (Stodel et al., 2006). Students do not sit in class or stand in halls waiting for

their instructor where casual conversation often occurs. Students must intentionally contact each

other through the online course messaging systems or email. Any attempt to communicate must

use the tools available to bridge the distance between them and build relationships.

Study of Rapport

Rapport is one of the most important parts of the process of human interaction (Jones,

Warren & Robertson, 2009). Feelings that develop and evolve as part of that interaction are part

of the personal experience of building rapport (Jiang-yuan & Wei, 2012). The operationalization

of rapport is a challenging part of this study. The following descriptions of rapport were used to

develop how the term was used in this study.

According to Jorgenson (1992) rapport "is a term that resists precise definition" (p. 148).

Lammers and Gillaspy (2013) specifically examining student-teacher interaction define student-

teacher rapport as "the degree of personal connection that a student feels towards the teacher"

(p.1). This is a very particular focus for the term, but is appropriate for Lammers and Gillaspy's

study where they developed a student-instructor rapport scale to be used as part of a course

evaluation with university students. Jones et al., (2009) define rapport initially as "an

establishment of mutual communicative trusts between users that subsequently result in the

achievement of high-quality communication" (p. 270). Rapport can only be achieved as a result

of communication and described by the individuals who experienced the interaction (Tickle-

Degnen and Rosenthal, 1990). If an individual's perception is a paramount factor in assessing

rapport, this adds additional complexity to developing or finding methods to validly measure

how one 'senses' this term.

Indicators of Rapport

Studying rapport requires recognizing what is an indicator of rapport occurring between

individuals. Tickle-Degnen and Rosenthal (1990) describe rapport through three general

components: mutual attentiveness, positivity and coordination. Mutual attentiveness is developed

when two individuals are focused towards one another. Positivity is described as friendliness

demonstrated between individuals. Coordination refers to individuals being balanced or in sync

with one another. (Tickle-Degnen and Rosenthal, 1990)

There are many studies of rapport building in specific professions where relationship

building is important. Gremler and Gwinner (2008) identified four rapport building behaviours in

their study of retail employees and their customers. These are "attentive behaviour, imitative

behaviour, courteous behaviour and common grounding behaviour" (p.310). In their study,

Webb and Barrett (2014) used these four behaviours as a starting point to code behaviours used

by instructors in a face to face environment. Their study of instructor-student rapport identified

five themes to organize instructor rapport building behaviours: uncommonly attentive behaviors,

connecting behaviours, information sharing behaviors, courteous behaviors and common

grounding behaviors.

Uncommonly attentive behaviour is described as when instructors are more enthusiastic and go more out of their way to engage students than is considered typical of an instructor. Connecting behaviours are using humour or being approachable when interacting with students. Information sharing behaviours include communicating clearly with students as well as non-verbal communication cues such as nodding and smiling at students. Courteous behaviours include being flexible, fair and consistent. Common grounding behaviours are being personable and relating to the students. All of these behaviours were identified through open ended questions answered in a survey administered in an American university (Webb and Barrett, 2014).

Looking all the indicators and behaviours listed above and it is easy to see how these can be identified in a face to face environment. Verbal cues like asking questions as well as non-verbal cues like eye contact and nodding of one's head are indicators of rapport. Friendliness can be conveyed through the tone of voice. Coordination can be indicated though a balanced contribution to conversation. Even without speaking, non-verbal behaviour such as smiling during interactions can increase individual's perception of rapport (Jiang-yuan & Wei, 2012).

In an online environment the rapport building indicators are evident as well, but must overcome the potential challenges in online courses such as asynchronous communication where it is difficult to have a spontaneous exchange of ideas. Text based conversation is also a challenge as there is an increased potential for misunderstanding the tone or meaning of messages without verbal and visual cues. Changing just one of these factors can have an impact on a person's perception. In Ice, Curtis, Phillips and Wells (2007) online course study, students who received instructor feedback by asynchronous audio recordings as opposed to text based feedback were more likely to feel their instructor cared about them and were more likely to apply

the instructor feedback content. Although the communication was one way, hearing a person's voice instead of reading a message made an impact on the students' behaviour and attitudes towards their instructor.

Importance of Rapport in Education

Although rapport building is often identified as an important element in retail business and medical fields (Tickle-Degnen & Rosenthal, 1990), it is also important in education. Establishing rapport between the instructor and students is likely one of the key requirements of a successful learning experience (Faranda & Clarke, 2004; Sull, 2014; Webb & Barrett, 2014). Sher's (2009) research of the student-student and instructor-student interaction in a web-based course indicated that communication between all parties is important for student satisfaction. Liu et al. also noted that when online MBA students participate in real-life or work-place related conversations, they "take ownership of their learning and become more motivated to learn" (2005, p.43).

According to Faranda and Clarke (2004) rapport is also the most valued indicator of an outstanding instructor. In their study, "Student Observations of Outstanding Instructors: Implications for Marketing Instructors", Faranda and Clarke (2004) discussed through in-depth interviews, that fourth year, business undergraduate students recommended instructors engage with students about non-course related material in the classroom, attempt to use humour and develop interpersonal relationships with their students. These are all elements of building rapport.

Rapport between students is also important for student success. Developing a sense of community among face to face and online learners can make course material more interesting

and contribute to better retention (Murdock & Williams, 2011). According to Murdock and Williams' (2011) study of students' perceptions of learning communities when enrolled in an online or face to face course there was no difference of students perceptions of learning communities based on course format. Students were able to effectively develop relationships in both settings. It was determined that when instructors intentionally structure an online learning environment to develop a sense of community, students can experience a sense of community similar to a face to face course. Instructors must be "intentional and innovative" (p. 311) to facilitate building of a learning community since students do not have face to face contact.

Sher (2009) determined in her study, "Assessing the Relationship of Student-Instructor and Student-Student Interaction to Student Learning and Satisfaction in Web-based Online Learning Environment" student-student interactions are important for building collaboration and group work but it is the rapport between instructor and student which makes a bigger impact on measureable indicators of student satisfaction. This was determined by Sher through a web based survey provided to students enrolled in online only courses at a private American university (Sher, 2009).

In their study, "Instructor-Student and Student-Student Rapport in the Classroom", Frisby and Martin (2010) determined that instructor-student rapport was correlated to student participation, likelihood to take another course and affective and cognitive learning. In the same study student-student rapport was linked to student participation but was determined to have no bearing on likelihood of taking another course or affective or cognitive learning. This study indicates that instructor-student rapport may be a factor for progressing students within a program, or even just to take another course with an institution.

Measurements of Rapport

Since rapport is perceived by an individual and can only be described through their experience (Tickle-Degnen and Rosenthal, 1990), self-reporting methods of measuring rapport are useful. Several instruments have been developed for instructors to assess rapport building in the classroom. The Student-Instructor Rapport Scale-9 is the summative tool developed by and used in Lammers and Gillaspy's (2013) study specifically to student rapport in an online course environment. Questions used for this evaluation are rated on a scale of one to five. Sample statements from the Student-Instructor Rapport Scale-9 for students are to reflect upon and rate includes:

Your instructor cares about you.

Your instructor respects you.

Your instructor has earned your respect. (Lammers and Gillaspy, 2013, p.4)

All nine questions are intended to be quick and easy for students to answer and hopefully promote thoughtful answers. Relationships between students are not considered with these scales, as these are questions typically used as part of a course evaluation.

Communication and Rapport Building in an Online Teaching Environment

Building rapport is often thought of in the context of face to face conversation. Examples of rapport building include similar body language and voice tone (Murphy & Rodríguez-Manzanares, 2012). Rapport building techniques that are used in the face to face classroom include making eye contact, using humour, relating personal experience to the coursework and talking to students outside of class (Legg and Wilson, 2009). Using many of these techniques can be more challenging without synchronous or face to face communication.

Much of the communication in online courses is not face to face and asynchronous. A common non-face to face communication method used in online courses is text based communication. Text based communication limits verbal and non-verbal cues and is often more time-consuming when considering the amount of time to formulate and construct a comment (Stodel et al., 2006). Critics of online education state that asynchronous, text based communication lacks richness and potentially leads to a loss of meaning in conversations (Ice, et al., 2007) which can be a hindrance to rapport building. Despite these limitations, asynchronous communication is one of the most touted features of online learning, as it allows participation from all over the world, at one's convenience. Asynchronous communication also allows for delayed responses which can result in a deeper level of thinking as students have more time to formulate a response (Delahunty, Verenikina & Jones, 2014).

Despite these positive attributes of asynchronous communication, face to face communication may still be desired by students. In their Canadian study, Stodel et al. (2006) interviewed university students who by posting in an online course forum, stated that they missed face to face contact in their current online course. Five themes emerged to describe what the students felt was missing in their online courses: "robustness of online dialogue, spontaneity and improvisation, perceiving and being perceived by the other, getting to know others, and learning to be an online learner" (p.5). The researchers recommended in order to overcome these limitations, instructors think outside the traditional methods and use the web-based technology tools available to them such as video conferencing. Communication and rapport building may occur naturally in the face to face environment but requires planning and forethought in the online environment.

The online course platform is controlled by the instructor, therefore planning activities requiring communication among class participants is often part of the instructor's role. In addition to organizing opportunities for class discussion, planning rapport building activities is identified as one of the responsibilities of online instructors. Liu, Bonk, Magjuka, Lee and Su (2005) determined that online instructors fulfill several roles using Berge's classification (as cited in Liu et al., 2005), which include a pedagogical role, social role, managerial role and technical role. The social role includes "promot[ing] a friendly environment and community feelings to support student cognitive learning processes" (p.31). The study by Ice et al. (2007) develops the online instructor roles further and defines the dimensions. The social dimension is defined as the social rapport builder. Again this defines part of the role of an online instructor is to build social rapport among course participants as well as establish an online community.

Student Expectations and Attitudes towards Rapport

Student expectations in the online learning environment are an area of study which has often been ignored (Kilic-Cakmak et al., 2009). As online learning is still a new medium, common and shared expectations of instructors and students is unlikely (Anagnostopoulos et al., 2005). Despite 'meeting' in the same environment, students' experiences and expectations differ from one another as well from the instructor (Deggs et al, 2010).

As an example of this, research has shown that the opinions of what makes a good online or face to face instructor differs between students and instructors (Catt, Miller and Schallenkamp, 2007; Benson et al., 2005). Catt et al., (2007) noted that students tend to list good communication skills as the most important trait of a good instructor, whereas educators tend to believe that knowledge of material is the most important trait of a good instructor.

This difference in attitudes and expectations towards classroom engagement can become a problem in the classroom. If students place a higher value on communication than instructors this may lead to other issues. According to Kilic-Cakmak et al., (2009) "…the larger the gap between students' expectations and experiences is, the less the student participation becomes" (p. 351). Therefore, to maintain student engagement understanding what student expectations are is important.

Instructor Attitudes towards Rapport

Since instructors often view engagement and rapport building differently from students. Instructor attitudes may be influenced by their own beliefs surrounding the importance of rapport building (Delahunty, Verenikina & Jones, 2014). Liu et al., (2005) determined in their study of an MBA program that instructors did not see the relevance or validity of taking on a social role within their online courses. Rapport building was one of the lowest perceived priorities by online instructors. Not surprisingly, pedagogical roles were perceived to be the highest priorities. Similar results were found in other studies where instructors favoured clarity of information over building rapport in the face to face classroom (Benson, Cohen and Buskist, 2005).

Another issue which is not related to instructor's opinion of the value of rapport building in online courses is their perception of the amount of time building rapport will require. Building rapport within a face to face class environment can occur solely during the scheduled classes. Online courses can require a time commitment which is outside of regular school hours (Delahunty, Jones & Verenikina, 2014). Contributing to, as well as monitoring student comments in forums or chats may occur outside of regular instructional hours. These time constraints might cause instructors to concentrate on pedagogy and perhaps forego more social activities that might

be perceived to lengthen time commitments. This is especially so if they do not see value in

developing social activities. In the study 'Exploring Four Dimensions of Online Instructor

Roles', Liu et al. (2005) determined that instructors expressed time commitment concerns in the

areas of facilitating online discussions, building social rapport, and learning the online tools to

improve interaction (p.33).

If instructors do not identify much value or are not provided time and resources to

develop rapport in their online courses, then it is unlikely instructors' will include rapport

building as an activity within their courses. Any rapport building which does occur will be

through incidental means as opposed to intentional rapport building and online delivery likely

provides fewer opportunities for incidental rapport building.

Role of Technology in Rapport Building

In the web-based learning environment technology becomes a key player in the ability of

students and instructors to communicate (Sher, 2009). Online learning platforms such as Moodle

provide many tools which are suited for collaboration and discussion. Video based conferencing

is one of the online synchronous tools which can be useful for student engagement.

In her study "Students' Experiences of Learning in a Virtual Classroom", Gedera (2014)

uses a case study approach to understand students' experiences with Adobe Connect

(http://www.adobe.com/products/adobeconnect.html), a synchronous video communication tool

used in online courses. Her results indicated that students liked the technology as it allowed them

to get to know each other better and communicate in real time (Gedera, 2014).

Affordances, such as synchronous video, within the online environment can enhance

learning and interaction but use varies widely depending on the instructor and students. The

instructor's technical ability limits what can be achieved with these affordances to promote interaction between the instructor and students. An instructor who is motivated to learn and use the technology appropriately is beneficial to guide students within the online learning system and can contribute to a positive learning experience.

It is important online instructors are aware of this technical role in online courses. The instructor does not just present material but must be able to assist students with navigating the technology to successfully complete the course (Liu et al., 2005). Instructors may be called upon to troubleshoot technology issues which are not typically part of the instructor role. Just as instructors have come to rely on their institute's computer support to solve technology problems in the face to face classroom; the same needs to be available in the online classroom. In the absence of this, frustration with the tools could affect further use on behalf of the instructor, possibly preventing engagement by them in computer mediated activities within a course (Gedera, 2014). To prevent this, time, training and proper resources are important for the instructor to be successful (Liu et al., 2005).

Students new to online learning may also find learning the tools used for interaction, collaboration and submitting work challenging to learn. If the technology does not work as expected, it can become a barrier to interaction within a course and hinder rapport building as well as learning. The ability to schedule synchronous sessions may also be a factor. Students may become frustrated if unable to join scheduled synchronous activities. This dissatisfaction could result in students enrolling in fewer online courses or trying to find alternatives.

As indicated, there are technological limitations to online learning and developing rapport amongst a class (Gedera, 2014). As online courses become more common, instructors' and

students' ability to use the technology will continue to improve. The technology itself will also adapt in time, hopefully improving the ability for collaboration. As collaboration becomes easier among students and instructors, the opportunities for traditional rapport building will likely also improve. This provides the possibility of more meaningful relationships and greater student satisfaction in online courses.

Research Questions

The following questions evolved from an examination of the literature.

1. What rapport building practices do online instructors implement?

2. What are the attitudes of post-secondary students towards rapport building with the instructor and other students in an online environment?

3. How do post-secondary students value rapport building with instructors or fellow students in online courses?

Methodology

The intention of this research study is to examine the experiences of the students and instructors in the online course environment. Research projects involving student and faculty attitudes in the areas of instruction often use interviews for data collection (e.g., Faranda & Clarke, 2004; Murphy & Rodríguez-Manzanares, 2012; Zembylas, Theodorou & Pavlakis, 2008). Interviews allow participants to discuss their personal experience and explore topics that the researcher may not have originally identified. Therefore interviews were conducted to collect the self-reflections of students and the instructor.

Faculty and students were chosen for this study in order to analyze both perspectives and attitudes towards rapport building. A purposive sample of participants was used with the selection criteria that the instructor and students needed to have online course experience. All participants were affiliated with the same technical institute in Western Canada.

An instructor who had experience teaching online courses was needed for this study. The preference for this study was to involve students who each had varying experience with online courses. The intent was to enlist one student with minimal online course experience (currently enrolled, but with no more than five online courses completed) and one student with greater online learning experience (currently enrolled, completed more than ten online courses) at the time of the interview.

Research Design

This exploratory case study used a cross-sectional research design. A qualitative approach was chosen to allow in-depth answers to the interview questions. Two students currently enrolled in exclusively online courses were asked to participate in semi-structured

interviews to discuss their experiences and preferences of the online learning method. An instructor from the same institute also participated in a semi-structured interview for their perspective on teaching online courses.

The researcher developed interview questions (see Appendix A for Instructor Interview Script and Appendix B for Student Interview Script) that were predominantly open-ended and attempted to encourage participants to talk openly about their attitudes and preferences for rapport building in an online course. Since the participants had potentially never thought about rapport in their online courses, the initial questions were designed to be easy to answer and fact based. As an example, the students were asked about the number of online courses they had taken and the instructor was asked about the number of online courses they had taught. The students and instructor within an online course were then asked if they had experience with the sharing of personal information that was not directly pertinent to the course material. The researcher provided examples to prompt the participants if needed. Examples provided included course participant introductions or the use of personal anecdotes. The types of technology and online course platform tools used in these activities were then discussed. The initial questions purposely discussed the sharing of personal information in online courses without using the term rapport. This was to get a sense of how the participants' describe rapport. The questions were also intended to guide the participants into thinking about rapport building without initially labelling and defining the process. This order of questioning was intended to prepare the participants for the more introspective questions that followed. The participants were then asked how they defined rapport. Once they explained their definition, they were then provided with the researcher's definition. The participants provided their definition first to better understand the respondent's initial perspective. The second half of the interview questions were developed to

delve more deeply into the attitudes and preferences of the participants. Open ended questions were developed to encourage the participants to openly share their experiences and attitudes of rapport building. The focus of the study was how participants perceived the online environment; therefore questions probed interviewees to provide narratives of their online course experience.

Researcher Role

The researcher was an instructor at a technical institute in Western Canada. The researcher conducted the interviews with the instructor and students herself. The instructor selected for this study was not affiliated with the researcher, but worked at the same institution as the researcher. The researcher did not instruct any courses in the instructor or students' program at the time of this study. This was done purposefully to distance the researcher from the participants and reduce the power relationship so students did not feel obligated to participate. For the researcher "the intent is to understand the phenomena in their own terms — to provide a description of human experience as it is experienced by the person herself" (Bentz & Shapiro, 1998, p. 96 quoted in Groenewald, 2004, p.13).

Study Population and Sampling Method

To study the student perspective, two post-secondary students enrolled in exclusively online courses were selected. The instructor recruited teaches in a two year diploma program at the technical institute. The instructor was contacted through email by the researcher (Please see Appendix C for Instructor Invitation to Participate).

Students were presented with the opportunity to participate in the study by their online course instructor. The instructor was asked to post a request for student volunteers for the two student interviews in his class (Please see Appendix D for Student Invitation to Participate). It

worked out that the instructor was also the first interview for this study, but this information was

not communicated to the students when they were subsequently interviewed. This student

population was chosen with the intent to remove any obligation to participate from the student

perspective since they had no connection with the researcher. Two students responded to the

research participant request by emailing the researcher directly. This method of contact was

chosen to diminish the chance of their instructor finding out which students participated in the

study. All participants were assured that no information as to who participated in the study would

be shared with any students or institution staff.

The study plan did not require that the participants were part of the same course, but the

initial plans were to attempt to use only one course. If not enough individuals volunteered from

this course, other courses would have been recruited until the number of required participants (2)

was reached. The instructor consented to participate in the study as well as sent the request for

student research volunteers. So, the instructor and two students were all in the same class but

would have been unaware of the other participants.

Data Gathering Method

For this study, semi-structured, face to face interviews were used. Students and an

instructor engaged in online learning were asked to each participate in a one hour face to face

interview. One student was chosen for her higher level of experience with online learning and the

other was chosen for her lower level of experience with online learning.

The study required interviewing faculty and students therefore two interview scripts; one

for the instructor and the other for both student participants (see Appendix A for Instructor

Interview Script and Appendix B for Student Interview Script). The questions on both scripts

were similar, but were adjusted appropriately depending on the participant's role. The instructor

interview script was comprised of twelve main questions with the student interview script

containing ten similar main questions. The questions focused on student-instructor interaction

and student-student interaction which occur in any learning environment. The third type of

interaction is student-content interaction, which was omitted for this study. The questions were

repeatedly edited, rewritten and reordered several times in an effort to develop the most

conducive environment for the participants to think about their experiences in their online

courses and retell their stories and feelings as accurately as possible.

Instructor Interview. The instructor interview was conducted at a mutually convenient

time during the work week at the institution. The meeting room used for the interviews was away

from the instructor's faculty offices and classrooms in order to maintain confidentiality for the

participant. The instructor signed a consent form that outlined the details of the study and

indicated his consent to participate in the study (see Appendix E for Instructor Information Letter

and Consent Form).

Student Interviews. Each student was followed up with through email to set up a

convenient time to meet for the interview. The students each agreed to meet on campus. A

private meeting room was booked by the researcher for each one hour interview. The meeting

room chosen for each student interview was away from the student's program faculty offices and

classrooms, to maintain confidentiality. The students each signed a consent form (see Appendix

F for Student Information Letter and Consent Form) that included the details of the study and

indicated their consent to participate in the study. At the end of each interview, the student was

given a $25 gift card as a token of appreciation for participating in the study.

All interviews were digitally audio recorded with the permission of the interviewees. The interviews were then transcribed (Please see Appendix G for Instructor Interview Transcript, Appendix H for Student Interview Transcript).

All of the participants are identified in terms of gender and online learning experience. To protect the anonymity of the participants, the faculty member is referred to as 'instructor' and the student participants are referred to as 'student' in this study and transcripts.

Analysis of the Data

The transcripts were studied and analyzed relating to the issues identified in the literature review. The interviews were coded shortly after transcripts were completed and a set of codes was developed. These codes were used to develop the results portion of this study as well as used to suggest areas for further research.

Phenomenological analysis was determined the most appropriate method for this study. After the interviews were transcribed, the data was analyzed by identifying common themes in the experiences of the participants. This study used Hycer's explication process method of phenomenological analysis (as described in Groenwald, 2004). This process involved preparing data, phenomenological reduction of data, organizing information into themes, validation of data and summarizing. In this study the results were interpreted with the use of the five phases of Hycner's explication process (Groenwald, 2004). The five phases of this process are as follows:

1. Bracketing and phenomenological reduction.

Bracketing requires that the researcher remained open and accepting of the responses provided by the interview volunteer.

2. Delineating units of meaning.

The data is studied and statements of meaning to the research are identified and isolated.

3. Clustering of units of meaning to form themes.

Through examination of the units of meaning, the researcher uses her judgement to organize the units into themes. Following the process, the researcher continues to return to the original interview and compare the topics as they develop.

4. Summarising each interview and data checking.

Once the themes have been organized it is useful to summarize the interviews incorporating the themes.

5. Extracting general and unique themes from all the interviews and making a composite summary.

A summary was then written by the researcher which attempted to accurately reflect the themes that emerged from the interviews.

Data Analysis Themes

The five themes used by Webb and Barrett (2014) to code instructor-student rapport in a face to face environment were used to organize rapport building activities described by the instructor and students in this study. The themes and examples of how they are displayed as discussed were:

- Uncommonly attentive behaviour – displaying personal interest and positive attitude

- Connecting behaviours – being approachable and using humour

- Information sharing behaviours – clear communication and expectations

- Courteous behaviours – displaying respect and open communication

- Common grounding behaviours – being personable and relatable

Ethics Approval

Ethics approval was provided by a Research Ethics Board at the University of Alberta in May of 2015. The Research Ethics Office at NAIT also granted ethics approval later the same month. Please refer to Appendix E for Instructor Information Letter and Consent Form and Appendix F for Student Information Letter and Consent Form.

Findings

Interviews

Three interviews were conducted for this study. The first interview was with a full time, male instructor who taught both face to face and online courses. The next two interviews were with students who had taken online courses within the same institute. Both students happened to be female. All participants had enough experience in online courses to address the studies topic. The interviews were planned to last up to an hour, yet each were only about 30 minutes in duration. The researcher took notes during the interviews in addition to recording them (Please see Appendix G for Instructor Interview Transcript, Appendix H for Student Interview Transcript).

Instructor Volunteer

The instructor who agreed to be part of the study had been a full time instructor for three years. He had worked with industry previous to his teaching career. Although he predominantly taught face to face courses, he had also taught two online courses.

Student Volunteers

Both of the students who volunteered to be part of the study had taken multiple online courses. The original intent for the study was to interview one student with limited experience (enrolled in or completed up to five courses) and one student with greater experience (greater than ten courses completed). Despite being distance learners, both students live locally to the institution.

The students had a variety of experience. One student had taken nineteen online courses. All of her post-secondary experience was of online courses at her current institute and she intended to continue taking more online courses. This student had chosen online studies initially since she was working full-time and started taking courses for self-interest. She eventually completed her diploma in five years. Diploma programs are designed to allow for completion within two years of full-time study but it is not uncommon for face to face or online students to take longer to complete a diploma program, particularly if taking the program part-time.

The second student had taken five online courses at the time of the interview and also stated she intended to continue taking online courses at the same institution. This student had also completed a daytime, face to face diploma program before she started her online courses. This student had chosen to continue her studies online since she was employed after completing her diploma and wanted to continue working full-time while working towards an applied degree.

Understanding Rapport

The participants provided definitions which were similar to the definitions this study used. They were able to describe the relationships in their online courses. The participants mentioned difficulty in answering some of the questions without more time to reflect on the topic of rapport and that they just had not thought about rapport in their online courses.

Indicators of Rapport

Five themes were used to identify the rapport building activities described by the instructor and students in this study. Although Webb and Barrett (2014) used the themes for a study of instructor-student rapport in a face to face course setting, the themes seem also relevant as indicators of rapport in an online environment. Rapport between students can also be

identified using these five themes because these behaviours are not exclusive to the instructor-

student relationship. The themes were used to identify rapport building activities as described by

the participants. Table 1 lists how these behaviours were discussed by the participants. All of the

behaviours noted by the instructor involved instructor-student rapport. Although the students

discussed student-student rapport in two areas (connecting and information sharing behaviours),

instructor-student rapport building was noted for each of the five behaviours.

Table 1
Rapport Building Behaviours Identified by Instructor and Students
(Adapted from Webb and Barrett, 2014)

Behaviour	**Discussed by Instructor**	**Discussed by Students**
Uncommonly attentive behaviour	Instructor repeatedly communicating with students outside of course through email	Instructors contacting students to meet and attend activities outside of class
Connecting behaviour	Instructor posting a photo of himself along with personal introduction	Student belief that it is important for students to be vulnerable and open to feedback from instructors and students
Information sharing behaviour	Instructor conducting synchronous video session with students to discuss assignment	Important for students to understand instructor expectations Important behaviour for students to connect with other students to share course information
Courteous behaviour	Instructor willingness to help students	Student expectations of prompt response from instructor
Common grounding behaviour	Instructor using personal anecdotes to relate to students	Instructors sharing of non-course related material with students

All of these behaviours are discussed in further detail along with the themes that emerged from the interviews. Further analysis of the instructor and two student interviews scripts revealed several themes regarding building rapport in an online learning environment:

- Importance of Rapport

- Rapport Development

- Communication Tools

- Challenges of Building Rapport

All of these themes were discussed by the instructor and by at least one student. These themes and the supporting data collected are described in detail below. Each theme is first discussed from the instructor's perspective followed by the student's or students' thoughts.

Importance of Rapport

The importance of rapport was one of the major themes discussed by the participants. Rapport building was identified as a necessary element by the instructor, in the face to face classroom, as well as online. The instructor felt that sharing personal, career-related anecdotes relevant to the coursework was important to help students understand concepts better, as well as built rapport.

Good rapport with the instructor was noted by both students as an important element to doing well in an online course. When describing rapport with instructors, one student explained:

I think it is more important than [building rapport] with other students. You need to clearly understand what is expected of you in the project or the course. If you don't have

that rapport, it is hard to communicate effectively with your instructor and it is hard to meet those expectations.

When asked about building rapport with other students, both students felt it was nice, but as one student described it, "not super important." Although not considered necessary, student-student rapport was described as being useful for information sharing. Getting to know fellow students who had also taken more or at least different online courses provided to be useful for learning about other instructors and courses. One student described this type of relationship as mentoring other students who had less experience.

Instructor-Student Rapport. Instructor-student rapport was brought up by all participants in the interviews. The instructor noted that when contacted directly by students, it was often to ask questions specifically about an assignment. Contact was only initiated by students when there was a concern about the course.

Both students felt that instructor-student rapport was necessary in the online course environment particularly to become comfortable with the instructor so they could ask questions confidently. Building rapport with the instructor was deemed necessary in order to understand the instructor's expectations for assignments and project.

Student-Student Rapport. Student-student rapport was discussed mainly by the student participants. The instructor only discussed student-student rapport as part of the introduction activities at the start of the course. There was no other mention of activities by the instructor where he promoted communication between students.

One student identified student-student rapport as important in order to have access to someone else that understood the course and could be of assistance if the instructor was not

available. Both students felt they had good rapport with other students despite limited contact with many of them. One student went on to describe that she even had good rapport with group members who did not actively contribute to group projects.

Instructor-Student Rapport Building Preferences. The student preferences when building rapport in online courses was discussed by the participants. The instructor was certain of his own attitudes and preferences for rapport building in his online courses but mentioned how he was unsure of what students preferred. Without visual cues to help determine if students were engaged or interested in the instructor's personal stories and information it was difficult to determine what students attitudes were towards the instructor's sharing of personal information. One student mentioned that she felt instructors provided personal information to make "it more personal, showing that they can relate to us". The same student also noted that sharing non-course related information in the online environment was a positive experience because "it makes you more vulnerable and open to more feedback". She further elaborated that "if you are not vulnerable, you kind of put up a bit of a guard and you can't learn as well or get better than as you are".

Rapport Development

The theme of rapport development was discussed by all of the participants. Sub-themes that emerged included the rapport building activities interviewees had participated in. How instructor-student rapport develops as well as student-student rapport development was also discussed. Student communication in online courses was another sub-theme of rapport development.

Rapport Building Activities. One common element which was identified by all interview participants is that rapport building activities in their courses were similar and always at the start of the course. Instructor introductions were common and typically followed by students being required to post their own introductions. All interviewees discussed participating in this type of activity which can be used for instructor-student rapport or student-student rapport building. These introductions often provided questions for students to answer and share with the rest of the class. One of the students described a typical introduction:

> [The instructor] would have a list of three to five questions and you are supposed to tell everyone about yourself and usually what you want to get out of the course, or where you are from, your background. And they kind of leave it open for you just to divulge what you want.

The students noted that they preferred introductions as a rapport building activity. Both expressed a dislike for group projects for rapport building, although this option was not identified by the researcher as a rapport building method. The distance and time differences between students were noted to be a challenge to online course group work. Quoting one student "it's just really hard to organize a project online and get everyone interfacing, especially when everyone is in different time zones and locations". Difficulties with coordinating communication between group members were considered a hindrance to building rapport.

Assigned rapport building activities typically are unrelated to course material and are used to assist in building rapport between students and the instructor. The introduction activities are only conducted at the start of the course. No other activities were identified by the instructor or students as being used only for the purpose of building rapport later in a course.

Instructor-Student Rapport Development. Instructor-student rapport building was discussed as being developed through several methods. The instructor explained how rapport with students was often developed through "ongoing emails back and forth". Students who were interested in engaging with the instructor further than just receiving the course material would contact the instructor outside of the course management tool, usually through email for further discussion. One student discussed how meeting her instructors in person had helped her develop better rapport with them. As the student explained, she was "always putting myself out there" when there were opportunities to attend educational institution events and meet instructors and other students.

Student–Student Rapport Development. Student-student rapport development was discussed by the student participants. Both students interviewed in this study noted that they had good rapport with other students in their class, but often this rapport was developed outside of the online class environment. Both students mentioned that the students that they considered to be friends with in their courses were students they had met face to face. One student discussed how she developed personal relationships with other students through group work when they met in person. As one student described "there was some people I developed relationships with and we actually still talk to this day and get together…" The other student noted that the students she had good rapport with were those that she knew before taking the online courses.

Initiating Communication between Students. How communication between students initiated was an area discussed by the participants. The instructor discussed using synchronous video sessions to promote discussion among students. The instructor also used text based course participant introductions to allow students to introduce themselves to fellow students as well as the instructor.

Students revealed that communication with unfamiliar students was initiated through course assignment or project requirements. Both students mentioned replying to other students posts as requirements within their courses. The students were also often required to work in groups which required choosing their own partners or working within a group chosen by the instructor. When asked "How would you describe your rapport with other students in your online courses?" one student replied:

> I'd say it's okay. It could be better, just like I said the communication aspect's hard. The group project that we had, out of the four, I felt that I was good with three of them, but we had one individual in our group who was totally disconnected for the entire project so you cannot build rapport when they were never there. Once we got into a kind of a niche and got comfortable with where everyone was at and what everyone's thoughts were on the project, it was really good. It was easy to communicate openly with the group.

Communication Tools

Communication tools used for rapport building were a common theme among the participants. The sub-themes identified were email use, online course platform tool use, and the posting of personal photos.

Email Use. The instructor interviewed for this study identified that better rapport was developed through email discussions outside of the Moodle platform although he did not indicate whether he preferred email for communication. The instructor reported that students did not typically use the Moodle messaging system to contact him directly. The students instead chose to use the email provided on the instructor introduction page available in Moodle. Some students

continued with emailing back and forth with the instructor, while some students never directly contacted the instructor at all.

The students interviewed for this study also used email to contact instructors, although did not note whether they had any preference for it or other forms of communication.

Online Course Platform Tool Use. Despite the availability of audio-visual communication tools within online course platforms, all of the participants discussed using text based communication predominantly in their online courses. The instructor identified that he had used the Adobe Connect tool but had found the tool was limiting to build rapport in his courses. Adobe Connect is a synchronous video, web conferencing tool that can be added to Moodle. Connect allows instructors to conduct real-time lectures or discussions with students. The instructor noted that he used synchronous video for introducing a case study assignment so students could hear his voice as well as ask questions. Despite the options available within the online environment, the instructor stated, "I don't think that you have as many opportunities or as many different methods to build rapport in online versus face to face".

Neither of the students interviewed mentioned instructors making use of any tools which would have students and the instructor communicating concurrently such as synchronous video. The students only spoke about using text based communication when online. One student shared that an instructor would post lectures online, but there was only one way (instructor to students) communication. Despite this option for interaction amongst instructor and students in the online environment, synchronous video communication tools do not appear to have been used in the courses taken by the student participants.

Although Moodle has a messaging feature which works similar to a web email system, the instructor interviewed mentioned that when his students had questions they typically contacted the instructor directly through the email he provided on his introduction page. The instructor only used Moodle provided tools to initiate contact with students in the course, so it is unclear whether students prefer email to similar asynchronous Moodle tools or that they did not realize that Moodle messaging was an available tool. The students interviewed for this study had similar experiences. Both mentioned that email was the most commonly used method used to contact instructors. One of the students did indicate that she would make an effort to determine which type of communication was most effective with particular instructors. This was also mentioned with relationship building with fellow students. According to the student volunteer, other students "can also provide insight as to which instructor replies best to email and this one you are more easily to get a hold of through Moodle".

One student noted that she preferred face to face interaction with instructors and had made efforts to meet her instructors at school events. The other student did not note a preference for communicating with her online instructors.

Personal Photos. Using personal photos within the participant's Moodle profile was discussed as a useful tool to get to know others within an online course. Moodle users have an option to post a photo which appears beside the participants name when they comment within their online courses. The instructor liked when students provided photos of themselves. It was considered useful by the instructor for developing a "mental picture" of the students. The instructor also noted that students did not comment on his use of a personal photo as a rapport building tool so he had no idea if the photo provided any value to the students. In his interview the instructor did comment that about half of his students posted photos of themselves.

One of the student participants also mentioned that the use of photos in Moodle course profiles was common and that it could be useful for identifying a student or instructor when first meeting face to face. Both students interviewed noted that many people posted an image in the institute's student portal, which would then also display in the student's Moodle profile.

Challenges of Building Rapport

The participants discussed the various challenges they felt limited rapport building. When asked how rapport building works in his class, the instructor explained "it's absolutely very restricted, based on my experiences, to build anything close to what you can in the face to face learning environment." The instructor also described the rapport with his online students as "limited", "distant" and "minimal".

The first student described rapport building as not "super important" but it was nice to have. She later described rapport building with the instructor as important. The second student stated "I feel with online studies it is hard, really hard to build rapport with your teacher and students because, like I said, everyone is so all over the place and so disconnected."

Several terms that came up repeatedly in all three interviews when discussing rapport in an online environment were 'hard', 'limited' and 'disconnected'. Despite these challenges, all interviewees felt there was some value in establishing rapport with someone in an online course, even if it was only with the instructor.

There were two sub-themes discussed that relate to the challenges of building rapport. Casual communication was identified as a topic as well as synchronous or face to face interaction.

Casual Communication. The difference between the ability to casually talk in a face to face classroom as opposed to online course environment was discussed by all participants. The instructor discussed that in face to face courses the time before class provided a repeated opportunity to converse with students and get to know them. As the instructor noted about communicating with students face to face, "you can ask them every morning how their day is going and build the rapport that way".

Although not used for the sole purpose of getting to know students or build rapport, the instructor discussed sharing his own personal anecdotes. These were used during synchronous video sessions with his students while discussing a case study assignment. Despite being related to the course material, this still provides a spontaneous sharing of information, unlike a recorded lecture. The students interviewed in this study had not participated in a synchronous video type of activity in their online courses. As a result no comparison to student's opinions of this type of activity could be made.

One student also pointed out that in the online environment "it's not like you are coming to a classroom and have that kind of family feel and you are always together and you're going through the program together". This element is specific to cohort based programs. The 'family feel' that the student mentioned may be developed though starting a program at one time with a particular group of students and working through the semesters along with the same cohort.

Synchronous or Face to Face Interaction. The lack of synchronous or face to face communication was discussed as a challenge to building rapport in online courses. In the online course concurrent communication must be scheduled and use the technology available in the online course platform or use online tools such as Skype or Hangouts. This planning is necessary

so that instructor and students are available at the same time to verbally communicate. As the instructor stated, this provides "a chance to hear each other's voice and relate more on a personal level". This is unlike other online activities which do not need concurrent participation.

Related to the issue of lack of visual cues is the potential for misunderstandings. One of the students relayed a story about not being able to read the tone of written messages from an instructor. This was problematic because of the short responses she was receiving and she mentioned thinking the "person was kind of a jerk". The lack of visual cues that are typical of face to face communication, such as nodding and smiling, can be a barrier to communicating effectively in an online course.

The amount of wait time in text based communication was also discussed as a barrier to building rapport. The "lag time" as it was described by one student, is also an issue for communicating effectively. There can be a long wait time between a student's question and then the instructor's response. As the student described:

> … in the online courses it is difficult sometimes because sometimes instructors never look at email and then you don't get a response until the next day or a few days, or in the middle of the night. So you are constantly waiting and it is the lag time between responses and that communication that really makes it hard because it is not just a face to face conversation. The lag time is really huge.

Rapport building with minimum face to face communication opportunities was described as difficult in online environments. Due to students and instructors doing coursework at any time, it can be difficult to manage and respond to questions in a timely manner. One student

commented specifically on this when asked if she has a personal connection with her online

instructors:

> In my online courses I would say no. I found it rather difficult and them not being very
>
> receptive to questions sometimes. Sometimes I feel like they are just overwhelmed.
>
> Instead of me having one instructor they have fifty students they are trying to attend to. I
>
> feel that maybe time constraints and that they are teaching face to face courses as well, so
>
> I feel that it is kind of limited.

The student found some instructors unresponsive, yet provided excuses on her

instructors' behalf as to why the personal connection was limited with them. The reasons for the

instructors' lack of interaction can be varied but difficult to assess without further

communication.

Discussion

Many of the topics discussed by the participants were similar to those in the literature. The comments about the importance of rapport, as well as the difficulty of building rapport in the online environment, were similar to views expressed in other studies. Several topics emerged that were not originally thought about by the researcher. Examples of these include how the proximity of the students to the institution affected rapport building or what activities students considered as rapport building. During conversation at the end of the interviews, two participants indicated that they had not thought about rapport in their courses and expressed concern that lack of forethought on the topic would hinder their answers. Despite these concerns, all participants provided thoughtful responses.

The discussion section is organized under several headings which detail the different topics identified by the researcher while studying the interview data. Many of the topics are separated based on responses relating to instructor-student rapport or student-student rapport. Next there are several recommendations for building rapport in online courses. These suggestions are based on review of both the comments from the interviews in this study and related literature.

Importance of Rapport

Attitudes towards rapport building in online courses varied among the participants. The instructor felt it was important to share personal experience as a rapport building tool to help relate material to students. The two students interviewed discussed rapport building as a nice element in their online courses although difficult to achieve.

The literature indicated that building rapport is an important element contributing to student success (e.g.: Faranda & Clarke, 2004; Sull, 2014; Webb & Barrett, 2014). The students in this study stated that rapport building, in general, was not a necessary element to their online courses, but when asked specifically about building rapport with the instructor or other students, they were able to explain why these types of rapport were useful for academic success. Both students appeared successful in their online courses, which may indicate self-directed learners with a high level of motivation. Both of these indicators are predictors of success in online courses (Kırmızı, 2015). This may result in less reliance on interaction with their instructor and other students for success.

Instructor-Student Rapport. Both students indicated that rapport with instructors was deemed as more important than rapport building with other students. This was specifically for academic success. It was explained by one of the students that in order to do well in a course, good rapport with your instructor may be more useful than with fellow students. Instructor-student rapport seems easier to develop than student-student rapport and it appears preferred that instructors initiate the process. This is consistent with other research like Sher's (2009) study where instructor-student rapport made a greater impact than student-student rapport on online student learning and satisfaction. Since rapport building between student and instructor can be important to student success, it is an area that instructors may want to give more attention. The instructor indicated that students only initiated contact when they had a concern with the course, which coincides with statements from the student participants. The students indicated rapport with instructors was important when they had questions about the course. This may be typical of any instructor-student relationship. Students in a face to face course may only seek out the

instructor when they have a question regarding their course. In the online environment where it may be more onerous to contact an instructor, the student may also only do so if needed.

Student-Student Rapport. The instructor's comments on student-student rapport were limited. This may be partly due to the instructor interview questions focusing on instructor-student rapport building. The interview was intended to allow the instructor to speak about his own experience and as a result he did not share any thoughts regarding student-student relationships or rapport building.

Student-student rapport was discussed as being important by the students as it was useful to have other students to discuss ideas and get advice. Student-student rapport is another factor which may contribute to student success. Students having a fellow student that can provide advice, direction or support, may contribute to student success in an online course.

The students felt they had good rapport overall with other students. Participating in group work or not may not have an effect on student-student rapport. Both students appeared to have very positive attitudes towards their fellow students. This may again relate to the student participants being highly motivated learners with positive attitudes.

Instructor-Student Rapport Building Preferences. The instructor discussed sharing personal work related anecdotes and providing a photo with his written introduction to help relate to the students but expressed concern over students' attitudes towards these activities. This behaviour is potentially well received as both students provided positive feedback when asked about instructors sharing personal information. This is similar to results found by Faranda and Clarke (2004) where using real world examples and imparting knowledge from personal business experience were perceived by students to be indicators of an outstanding instructor.

Rapport Development

How rapport develops in online courses was a topic discussed by all participants. Considering the amount of online course experience among all the participants, the rapport building experience among them was similar. They had done similar activities and a preference for developing rapport face to face was prevalent among the participants.

The participants also discussed how the building of rapport may occur intentionally or incidentally. The instructor discussed using introductions as a deliberate act to learn more about students. Conversely the use of synchronous video was primarily for pedagogical purposes but had the additional bonus of allowing participants to hear each other's voice aiding students to get to know one another.

The students also discussed the course participant introductions as an intentional rapport building activity. Incidental rapport building activities they discussed included group projects and attending course related events where they got to meet instructors and other students. One student also discussed how incidental rapport building is easier in the face to face environment where students spend time physically together.

Rapport Building Activities. The only seemingly intentional rapport building activity common in all the interviewee's online courses was course participant introductions at the start of each course. The instructor and both students indicated they had taken part in this type of activity. Introductions can be used as both an instructor-student rapport building activity or a student-student rapport building activity. Although a useful tool to learn a bit about students and allow an instructor to use the information to tailor material to suit student's backgrounds and interests, it is limited as a rapport building tool. This activity is only done at the beginning of a

course and not revisited. Information shared is based on what the instructor requests students post. Additionally students do not necessarily respond to other students' posts unless required to do so by the instructor. Depending how the instructor moderates the activity, there may not be any dialog between students or between students and instructor.

It was interesting to note that both students discussed group projects as a rapport building activity. Although group work was not introduced by the interviewer, both students provided group projects as an example of a rapport building activity. From the perspective of an instructor, it is possible that this activity is only thought of from the pedagogical view. Group work is useful for learning to work with others but there are other benefits as well. It may also be an incidental rapport building activity. Group work can help initiate interaction and promote student engagement in an environment where students may not take the opportunity to build relationships on their own. Student engagement contributes to rapport building and building of personal relationships which can provide peer support for students within online courses.

Instructor-Student Rapport Development. The instructor identified building rapport in his online courses using text based communication. The instructor felt he developed good rapport with students he had repeated email communication with, indicating that rapport needed to develop over time.

One student discussed meeting instructors at face to face events especially helped develop rapport. Even though the events she had attended were organized by her program and related to her coursework, they provided a potentially incidental benefit of developing rapport between instructors and students who were close to the school in proximity. The experience of

building rapport with instructors may be different for a distance learner who cannot attend such events.

Student-Student Rapport Development. It is interesting to note that both students in the study identified their online course friends as individuals they had met face to face. One student indicated that the students she had built rapport with were those she met socially in person. The other student was friends with students she knew previously from her face to face diploma program. If the students had not lived locally to the institution or did not know fellow students before taking the online courses, they may be limited to building rapport only in the online environment. This might result in different attitudes and expectations of rapport building in online courses. Neither student had used synchronous video tools either so whether virtual face to face contact would have facilitated rapport building in their online courses is unknown.

Initiating Communication between Students. The instructor discussed initiating communication in his courses through participant introductions and synchronous video sessions. Both of these may help students get to know each other, but they are instructor led and instructor mediated activities. Whether students may feel more comfortable engaging without an instructor reading or listening to their conversations may warrant further exploration. Student-student rapport building may be better in a setting away from the course management tool or instructor led sessions.

The students noted that they only engaged with other students they had not previously known, when required for their coursework. Opportunities for spontaneous casual conversation with other students in online courses may be limited. Because of this, it is possible that students in an online course may not choose to engage with another student unless motivated through

assigned group work. This might be different for students who are part of a cohort based program and will likely be with the same students in their courses.

Communication Tools

Email was discussed by all participants as a common communication tool within their online courses. Email would likely be more familiar and more conveniently accessed by both students and instructors than anything within the online course environment, likely the reason for its popularity.

Moodle has various communication tools including a messaging system, similar to email, which can only be used while logged into Moodle. This makes Moodle messaging potentially less convenient to use and may indicate why it was not used as often for communication. One student mentioned that she would use the tool that she thought her instructor preferred. How she determined which tool her instructor preferred was not explained. Likely it was the tool the instructor initiated communication with to the student, or the method which had the shortest response time from the instructor. There are many possible reasons for choosing a specific communication tool. Some courses participants may not be aware of the online course communication tools available, they may be aware of them but still prefer email or feel instructors prefer email and therefore choose it.

The instructor and students also noted how inserting photos into Moodle profiles helped get to know a course participant. Using a photo in their Moodle profile was discussed as a fairly common occurrence, yet not required. Why students or instructors choose not to post personal photos in Moodle was not discussed. It is possible that students and instructors prefer not to personalize their profile in this manner or simply because it is not required and if the instructor

does not post a photo, students may not be aware of this option or see it as necessary either. As a

rapport building aid, instructors could post their own photo in their profile and then request

students also provide an image in their profiles as part of the participant introductions. This may

help all participants feel they know each other better.

In addition to visual aids, synchronous communication might help build rapport. The

instructor discussed using a synchronous video tool to successfully build rapport with students.

He felt it was useful to hear each other's voices and helped them all get to know each other

better. The students had not used this tool for conversations but other research indicates that this

may be one of the best options to provide interaction between course participants. In Sher's

(2009) study, weekly online discussions were useful to develop meaningful interaction between

students. Many of the students in the study requested that more opportunities to verbally interact

were available in the course (Sher, 2009). How often or what time of day to have synchronous

communication within a course may vary depending on the course and its participants. Providing

a variety of times and dates of synchronous conversation might provide enough flexibility to

allow students to engage if they are willing, have access to the necessary technology and are

available. Using different synchronous communication tools for one on one conversation might

also be useful for developing rapport.

Challenges of Building Rapport

There are a number of factors that contribute to rapport building in the online course

environment. Challenges may include providing opportunities for casual and spontaneous

conversation which may be easier to do in a face to face course.

The delivery method (i.e.: online as opposed to face to face) is not the only factor which contributes to rapport building. First and foremost, the participants must be willing to connect and be part of the experience. The instructor spoke of students who were in constant need of contact with him and the students mentioned the difficultly of doing group work with students who were distant, either due to other commitments or genuine time zone differences. Building rapport in an online course may be difficult, but students and instructors must be willing to engage with the other participants before rapport building can occur.

Casual Communication. The lack of casual communication was also a theme in the participant discussions. The structured, instructor controlled communication environment in online courses appears to limit rapport building opportunities. The participants spoke about the benefits of conversations that occur before class in the face to face classroom.

As one student noted, the lack of a "family feel' and the inability to just talk to students casually like you do in a face to face classroom, was limiting to building rapport. Although casual communication did not appear to be part of any online course discussed by the students, there were opportunities to meet and talk to other students through group assignments. This may lead to casual communication and friendship building.

There are online programs which use the cohort model; the same students enrolled in the same courses. Recognizing the same students and taking the same courses together can help students develop rapport. Providing opportunities for students to meet face to face early in the program, may also help build rapport early and may assist some of the participants develop relationships for the duration of their program. The Communications and Technology Graduate Program at the University of Alberta uses both models where the students are brought together at

the start of the program for a mandatory three weeks of learning in the face to face classroom

before starting the online course portion of the program (University of Alberta, n.d.). The

students continue through the program as a cohort, taking most of the courses together.

Requiring face to face courses may not be feasible in all learning situations as the travel and

distance may be too great for many participants. In these situations, synchronous chats may be

more useful to achieve this goal.

Synchronous or Face to Face Interaction. The lack of synchronous or face to face

interaction was considered by participants a hindrance to building rapport. One student discussed

the lag time and the potentially long wait time that existing in non-synchronous communication.

In addition to allowing more spontaneous and casual conversation, synchronous conversation has

other benefits. It provides immediate responses which can decrease the misunderstanding and

frustration of wondering if a person received the message or when they will respond.

The face to face element appears to be an important part of rapport building as discussed

by participants. The students noted having the best rapport with other students they had met face

to face. As mentioned before, the visual cues provided by face to face communication are also

important to build rapport. One student discussed thinking an instructor was a jerk due to the

perceived tone and short responses in the written messages she had received. Real or virtual face

to face communication can help reduce the chance of misunderstanding a person's message or

tone.

All of the participants in this study indicated that they preferred face to face rapport

building in their online courses. For students who cannot or choose not to meet face to face, tools

such as synchronous video may allow virtual face to face interaction which can help develop rapport among participants.

Suggestions for Rapport Building in Online Courses

As has been noted throughout this study, there were many challenges of building rapport discussed by the participants. The section below discusses various tools and strategies which may be used to help overcome some of these challenges. These suggestions are based on the themes which evolved through the interviews in this study.

Formative and Summative Evaluations. The instructor's interview uncovered that there is a great deal of speculation on the instructor's part when determining what type of activities are contributing to rapport building in the online environment. It is often noted that the lack of visual cues and concurrent interaction make it difficult to determine if communication is effective (Delahunty, Jones & Verenikina, 2014). The instructor discussed using rapport building tools similar to those recommended by Murphy and Rodriguez-Manzanares (2012) like providing help and guidance and sharing personal information. Although the instructor noted that he preferred sharing personal information, he was unsure of the students' preferences.

In an effort to determine if current activities are effective, instructors may use formative (during the semester) course evaluations to collect data regarding student preferences for rapport building in their courses. This would allow instructors to determine if their additional time and energy setting up activities not related to course material is useful for students like it is to the instructor. Summative course evaluations, which are typically done at the end of a semester, could also be used as a tool to collect student preferences.

The summative course evaluation tools developed by Lammers and Gillaspy (2013), provide a starting point for instructors to determine how their rapport currently has developed in the class and then use the results to further improve their rapport building activities with students in future classes. The Student-Instructor Rapport Scale-9 might be a particularly useful tool as it is only nine questions and not onerous for students to complete (Lammers & Gillaspy, 2013).

Online Course Platform Education for All Users. A common theme throughout the interviews was that the use of online course tools is limited and that the online course tools are perceived to be limiting. The instructor indicated that the tools available in Moodle were limiting to building rapport in online courses. The tools were likely designed for pedagogical purposes and they may not be ideal for rapport building activities. As technology improves, online synchronous communication tools may improve as well.

The instructor also discussed how students often preferred to use email to contact him instead of the Moodle messaging tool. The students mentioned in their interviews that they had not been exposed to synchronous audiovisual tools in their online courses. The limited use and negative attitudes towards the tools may be due to lack of exposure and training in the online course platform. It is important that instructors see the value in using the synchronous tools and the value of rapport building in their courses. Improving access to or educating instructors about the online course tools available, like synchronous video, could provide more opportunities for students and instructors to communicate and potentially collaborate. To achieve this, instructor and students need to be willing to communicate synchronously. Gedera's (2014) study of student's experience with Adobe Connect, determined that students liked the Connect tool as it allowed them to communicate in real time and get to know each other. Dissatisfaction occurred when there were technical difficulties with the online tools. Building rapport online may become

a less deliberate act and may occur spontaneously if the communication tools were easier to access and use. Since deliberate rapport building activities may only occur at the start of a semester, easier access and easier to use tools could allow rapport building activities throughout the semester.

Introducing new technology may add other challenges. The technical role of the online instructor potentially adds to the instructional workload, potentially taking away from the instruction of the intended course material. Since educating students in the use of online course platforms would benefit student learning in all programs and courses, it is advised that all new students take an online tutorial to prepare them for learning in the online environment.

The students also mentioned a dislike for online group work. Although disliking group work may also extend to face to face courses, online group projects were considered onerous because of the difficulty of organizing synchronous meetings when students may be in different time zones or have different commitments which made organizing mutually convenient meetings difficult. The need for synchronous communication with group work may add to the dislike of these types of projects. Understanding the available communication technology may help group work be less difficult. If students were better versed in the use of Skype and Google Hangouts for group meetings or Google Docs for group writing, working in groups may be less daunting.

Communicating Effectively. Despite the popularity of text based communication, there may be a need to remind course participants of how to effectively communicate with each other. Timely and thoughtful responses to inquiries are necessary on the behalf of instructors. Taking time to check the tone of written responses to help prevent misinterpretation of messages, including implementing a policy to respond to questions within a defined turnaround time (e.g.,

24 hour period), can prevent potential student angst. This is another area where tools like Abode

Connect are useful because they allow real time discussions, so questions can be answered

immediately (Gedera, 2014).

      Different and More Rapport Building Activities throughout Course. There are other

opportunities for rapport building activities other than just at the start of a course. Forums and

chat tools can be used for more communication early or later in a semester. Assignments

involving personal story telling can be related to course material and do not need to be solely for

the purpose of rapport building.

      Another option is asking students to engage in different 'ice breaker' style activities

throughout the course. There are many face to face activities used in professional workshops

which could be adapted to the online classroom that would allow course participants a chance to

get to know one another and provide variety from the typical written introductions.

      Instructors may also build rapport with their students by relating their own stories to

course material and assignments. This was mentioned by the instructor as a method he found

effective in his online courses. This method could be expanded to allow students to share their

knowledge and pertinent experience as an activity with the class.

      Despite students' negative reaction to group projects in their online courses, this type of

assignment may be well suited for building rapport among students within an online course. In

Stodel et al.'s (2006) study, it was determined that triads of online learners working together,

developed better social presence than the class as a whole. Smaller groups may also be easier to

coordinate online than larger groups. Despite the potential distance and time constraints, group

work is recommended to promote relationship building between students.

More Opportunities for Non-text Based Communication between Participants.

Introducing or increasing use of synchronous audio or video tools in online courses may provide better opportunities for rapport building. Instructors could try to introduce these tools if there are not currently using them. Providing synchronous chat sessions throughout the course at different times and on different days of the week, will allow more chances for conversation, and hopefully involve more students if they cannot always be available for each session. One on one synchronous communication could also be used for virtual office hours. This may be more convenient and efficient for students and instructors. Students should also be advised to use tools such as Skype or Google Hangouts with smaller groups of fellow students, to help them communicate and build relationships.

If synchronous communication is not possible for participants in an online course, asynchronous communication may be a practical alternative. Asynchronous video may be an improvement on text only communication. If an instructor used a video recording for lectures or providing feedback, there are still visual cues and tone of voice to improve clarity of the message. Students could also provide video posts for introductions or projects, to share with the class.

Posting of a photo of each participant can be helpful as well. If a student spoke to a particular person while meeting online, the photos can help identify the person later when engaged in text based communication. Instructors should also model this behaviour by posting their own photo and then request students in the course do the same. This reveals a bit about each individual and can be helpful to all participants when trying to identify each other. As mentioned by one of the students, photos help identify others if you have to meet face to face.

Research Questions Revisited

Three questions formed the basis of this study. The questions and responses determined from the study are detailed below.

The first question was **what rapport building practices do online instructors implement?** The participants indicated that the only intentional rapport building activity was participant introductions at the start of the course. This could be used for developing instructor-student rapport as well as student-student rapport. Incidental rapport building activities discussed were synchronous online discussions and group projects. Other rapport building efforts by the instructor included sharing personal work related anecdotes as well as sharing personal photos.

The second question was **what are the attitudes of post-secondary students towards rapport building with the instructor and other students in an online environment?** The students explained that they enjoyed building rapport with their instructors as well as with their fellow students. Initially, students did not feel rapport building with online instructors or other students was important but were able to explain how rapport building occurred and their preferences for rapport building in their online courses. Face to face methods of communication and rapport building appeared to be preferred to asynchronous, online means of communication.

How do post-secondary students value rapport building with instructors or fellow students in online courses? This last question was also addressed by the students during the interviews. Students indicated that rapport was nice to have but not a necessary element of their online learning. They both indicated that building rapport with their instructor was important for academic success. Building rapport with fellow students was not considered as important but still

useful for the pedagogical purpose of providing an alternative source of help and support when needed in a course.

Further Investigation

Although this study provided insight into the attitudes towards rapport building of students and instructors in online courses, there are several areas which could be adapted for future research. These key areas: online instructor experience, online student experience, post-secondary student experience, student distance from institution, synchronous or asynchronous rapport building methods, and data collection methods will be explored in more detail below.

Online Instructor Experience. When designing this study, the participants were chosen based on their experience with online courses. The instructor interviewed was relatively new to teaching (three years' experience) and had only taught two online courses. Interviewing another instructor who has taught more online courses may have more experience to share.

Online Student Experience. The students who volunteered for this study met the online course experience desired (one student with five or less online courses experience and one student with more than ten online courses experience). The student who had taken five courses appeared seasoned in online learning therefore finding a student with only one or two courses may provide an interesting contrast to a student who has taken more than five courses. For further research the criteria for selecting little or more experienced students might change.

Another potential view to study is students with no online course experience and their expectations and attitudes to towards rapport before and after they complete an online course. An individual with no experience in online courses may have very different attitudes and

expectations towards rapport building in such a setting than someone who has taken a few courses.

Post-secondary Student Experience. Both students interviewed in this study had several years of post-secondary education at the same institution. This experience included online and face to face courses. Another option may be interviewing a student who has online course experience but is new to the institution used in the study, to contrast with someone who has been attending the institution for several years. Learning in the online environment has its own challenges, but introducing a new institution may bring forth other issues.

Student Distance from Institution. Another point which became relevant as the project developed was that both students lived locally to the institution, yet still chose online courses. This provided an easier opportunity to meet instructors and fellow students face to face which affected how they developed rapport. Choosing students who live further away from the institution (e.g., out of province) would make face to face contact more challenging and could change how rapport was developed. If the students lived further away from the school and did not have the option of face to face contact in their courses, their attitudes and expectations may be different. Interviewing one student who had no face to face contact with their online course participants and another who had face to face contact may provide interesting findings.

Synchronous or Asynchronous Rapport Building Methods. Building rapport in the online learning environment has been well researched in recent years (e.g., Jones et al., 2009; Lammers & Gillaspy, 2013; Murphy & Rodríguez-Manzanares, 2012; Wright, Jones, & D'Alba, 2015). A related area of study is the communication methods in online courses. Specifically,

comparing asynchronous and synchronous rapport building methods in online instruction could prove interesting.

Data Collection Methods. Semi-structured interviews were chosen for this study and seemed to be an appropriate choice to discuss a complex concept such as rapport. Two of the participants noted at the end of the interview that they would have preferred to see the questions in advance to allow more time to think about their responses. It is recommended for similar studies that participants are provided more information about the topics (but not necessarily the specific questions). For example, informing the participant that the interview will be about communication between instructors and students in the online course environment. This may allow time for contemplation and reflection on their own experience before attending the interview.

Another tool that would allow for self-reflection is the emotion diaries utilized by Zembylas et al., (2008) in their study of "The Role of Emotions in the Experience of Online Learning". The ability to personally detail thoughts and emotions towards rapport building while it is occurring may be valuable as a self-reporting method of gathering data in coupled with semi-structured interviews or focus groups.

A theme that developed from the interview data was that student participants chose to develop rapport with other students through face to face methods. In future interviews it would be interesting to develop this further. Adding questions to the interview script which asked how they would build rapport in an online course if face to face methods were not available, may be useful.

Topics of Further Study

Understanding Rapport's Role in Student Success. A better understanding of whether rapport plays an important role in increasing student success in an online environment is a potential area of further study.

Rapport Building Activities. Studying specific online course communication activities is another potential area for further research. Developing a better understanding the type of activities that are effective at building rapport in an online environment may be useful. Both students in this interview mentioned group projects as a method of rapport building even though it was not mentioned by the interviewer. Further research into this type of activity as a rapport building aid would be of a potential use for instructors.

Online Course Tools. Online course tools which allow synchronous, audio and video communication best imitate face to face communication. A useful study may be to see if use of these types of tools provides similar rapport building capabilities that face to face courses offer and how these also compare to other online rapport building methods.

Rapport building using different communication mediums (i.e., text based vs. video based communication) in online courses is another area for further research. Studying text based communication tools such as forums, and their perceived effectiveness in comparison to synchronous, video communication tools would also be useful.

Instructor and student ability to use technology in online courses is expected to improve as online courses continue to become more prevalent. An area of study may be whether student and instructor ability and comfort with the online course technology improves over time. If the

technology continues to improve and the participants become more comfortable with the technology, how this affects rapport building in the online courses may be of interest.

Conclusion

This study sheds light on what are instructor and students' attitudes towards rapport building in online courses. Much of the literature on rapport building in the online classroom indicated that students had positive attitudes towards rapport building. This study was consistent with that literature, indicating that the instructor and students enjoyed having good rapport with other participants in their courses. In addition, there were several other themes that developed from this study.

In online courses, rapport building activities tend to occur at the start of the semester in the form of participant introductions. This activity can be for building instructor-student rapport or to a lesser extent, student-student rapport. Another identified student-student rapport building activity included group projects, where the primary focus is the assignment and rapport building is incidental but may be intentional. Another rapport building activity identified was group chats, synchronous video, which again was used primarily for an educational purpose. Other online communication tools outside of Moodle such as Google Hangouts or Skype might also work and may be more convenient and easier to use for building rapport between students or between students and instructors.

The participants of this study all found that building rapport was of some value in the online course environment. Students placed greater value on developing rapport with instructors than other students. Building rapport with instructors was considered important in order to get academic support and receiving feedback. Developing rapport with other students was described

as potentially important for building additional support. Building rapport with other students may lead to extra help with coursework and assignments.

Synchronous video communication might be the best rapport building tool available in online courses at this time as it can create an environment closer to familiar face to face rapport. Synchronous video allows students and instructors to more easily use existing oral rapport building skills than developing and using new rapport methods that will work well in an online asynchronous environment.

Online learning is useful for allowing students flexibility in their learning, but unless other methods are found, using a tool which requires students and instructors meet virtually, still has value for developing rapport and relationships within online courses.

Overall this study highlighted that rapport is not an often thought about phenomenon by online course instructors or students. Despite the overall theme in related literature that rapport is an important contributor to student satisfaction and student success, it is not always treated as an important element of online courses. The themes of difficulty with technology, challenges of concurrent communication with students in different time zones and competing priorities are all factors that contribute to the overall feeling that building rapport in online courses is difficult. This may be true, but is by no means insurmountable. There are many activities and techniques used in face to face environments that can be adapted to the virtual classroom. These include using text based communication and 'ice breaker' activities. As faculty and students continue to be part of the online course community, the technology will become more common and easier to use. This might allow rapport building to occur more easily and spontaneously as it does in the face to face classroom.

   Helping instructors and students become more aware of the potential importance of building rapport throughout their classes could go a long way to improving rapport in online classes. It also would be useful to develop new methods and procedures that allow rapport building in a traditional, asynchronous, text-based, online environment.

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Appendix A: Instructor Interview Script

1. How many face to face and online courses have you instructed within the last three years?

2. What type of non-course related information do you share in your online courses? [examples if needed: use of personal anecdotes, instructor introduction or bio, anything not pertinent (although can be related) to the course material]

3. Can you tell me about what methods you have used within your online courses to connect with and share non-course related information with students? (Examples if needed: introduction emails or videos, feedback through email)

    a. Which of these do you used most frequently?

4. Can you tell me how you try to get students to share information or interact with you and/or the rest of the class? (examples if needed: introduction forum posts, group chats)

5. What does the term rapport mean to you? (probes if needed: a common way of using the term is 'rapport building' which is often between a sales person and a client)

6. For this study I'm using the term rapport as building personal connections between instructors and students as well between students (relate this to the interviewee's response in question 4). How would you relate the importance of rapport relative to other aspects of a course?

7. How does rapport building work in your face to face classes?

8. How does rapport building work in your online courses?

9. What do you see as the differences between rapport building a face to face course as opposed to an online course?

10. How would describe the importance of developing rapport with students in an online course?

11. How would you describe your rapport with students in your online courses?

12. Is there anything you would like to add about rapport's role in your classes?

Appendix B: Student Interview Script

1. How many online and face to face courses have you taken within the last three years?

    a. Why did you choose to take courses online?

2. Can you tell me how your online instructors have shared information not directly related to course content? (Examples if needed: introduction emails or videos, feedback through email)

    a. Which of these were used most frequently?

3. Can you tell me about how your instructor(s) asked you to use to share information or interact with the rest of the class? (examples if needed: introduction forum posts, group chats)

    a. Which ones did you prefer and why?

4. What does the term rapport mean to you? (probes if needed: a common way of using the term is 'rapport building' which is often between a sales person and a client)

    Often these activities we've discussed are used as tools to build personal connections or build rapport between instructors and students as well between students. That is how I'm using the term rapport in this study.

5. How would you describe your experience with online courses and how might that affect rapport?

6. How would you describe your rapport with other students in your online courses?

    a. How do you feel this rapport (or personal connection) developed?

7. How would describe the importance of developing rapport with other students in an online course?

8. How about with your instructor? Do you have a personal connection with them?

    a. How would you describe the importance of developing rapport with your instructor?

9. Considering what we've discussed about rapport in an online setting, how does it compare to how rapport works in a face to face classroom?

10. Is there anything you would like to add about rapport's role in your classes?

Appendix C: Instructor Invitation to Participate

Hi <instructor name>,

I am currently completing my capping project for my Master of Arts in Communications and Technology degree at the University of Alberta and am now at a point where I will be gathering the data for my research. My research topic is "Instructor and Students' Attitudes towards Rapport Building in Online Courses." I have chosen to do my research with an instructor and post-secondary students at NAIT who have experience with online courses.

The purpose of this project is to explore post-secondary instructors and students' attitudes towards rapport building within an exclusively online environment. In this study the term rapport is used in the same context as relationship building. Students may build rapport (or build relationships) with other students or their instructors. Attitudes towards building both types of relationships will be examined.

The next step is seeking participation and consent from you and two of your students to participate in the study. This study will involve minimal risk to yourself and the students.

There is no obligation to participate on your part. I am prepared to ask other instructors if you prefer not to participate. If you agree to participate in this study I have attached a "Research Study Request for Volunteers" document which I would need you to post in Moodle for your online students to read. The document describes my study and requests volunteers to participate in a one hour interview. The document requests that students who are interested in the study contact me directly (my email is provided) so you or other students will not be aware of which students volunteer to participate.

The time commitment for you will be a one hour interview at a mutually convenient location and time. The student volunteers will each meet with me for a one hour interview at a time and location which is convenient for each of them.

I have attached the consent form for your review which also gives greater detail about the study. The study has been reviewed and approved by the research ethics offices at both NAIT and the University of Alberta.

Please contact me if you have questions after reviewing the consent form. If you consent to participate in the study please reply to this email or call me at 7072. We can then set up a convenient time and location to meet. I will have a copy of the consent form for you to sign at the interview.

Thanks for your consideration,

Regards,

Carrie Vos

Research Investigator: **Supervisor:**
Carrie Vos   Dr. Stanley Varnhagen
NAIT   University of Alberta
11762 106 Street Northwest   10230 - Jasper Ave
Edmonton, AB,   T5G 3H6   Edmonton, AB, T5J 4P6
carriev@nait.ca   Stanley.Varnhagen@ualberta.ca
780-471-7072   780-492-3641

Appendix D: Student Invitation to Participate

Volunteers Required for Research Study

I am looking for two student volunteers to participate in a research study. I am an instructor at NAIT (the Engineering Design and Drafting Technology program) who is also a student at the University of Alberta. I am currently completing my capping project for my Master of Arts in Communications and Technology degree. I am now at a point where I will be gathering the data for my research. My research topic is "Instructor and Students' Attitudes towards Rapport Building in Online Courses." I have chosen to do my research with an instructor and students at NAIT who have experience with online courses.

The purpose of this project is to explore post-secondary instructors and students' attitudes towards rapport building within an exclusively online environment. In this study the term rapport is used in the same context as relationship building. Students may build rapport (or build relationships) with other students or their instructors. Attitudes towards building both types of relationships will be examined.

I am looking for students to interview. The time commitment for you will be a one hour interview at a mutually convenient location and time. I am interviewing two students at separate times. Those selected for the study will be chosen on a first come, first served basis. This study will involve minimal risk to yourself. You will be reimbursed any parking expenses as well as provided with a $25 gift card as a token of appreciation for your time.

Please contact me directly at carriev@nait.ca if you are interested in participating in this study. Your instructor and fellow students will not be informed of your intent to participate.

I have attached the consent form for your review which also gives greater detail about the study. The study has been reviewed and approved by the research ethics offices at both NAIT and the University of Alberta.

Thanks for your consideration,

Regards,

Carrie Vos

Research Investigator: **Supervisor:**
Carrie Vos   Dr. Stanley Varnhagen
NAIT   University of Alberta
11762 106 Street Northwest   10230 - Jasper Ave
Edmonton, AB, T5G 3H6   Edmonton, AB, T5J 4P6
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Appendix E: Instructor Information Letter and Consent Form

Study Title: Instructor and Students' Attitudes towards Rapport Building in Online Courses

Research Investigator:	**Supervisor:**
Carrie Vos	Dr. Stanley Varnhagen
NAIT	University of Alberta
11762 106 Street Northwest	10230 - Jasper Ave
Edmonton, AB, T5G 3H6	Edmonton, AB, T5J 4P6
carriev@nait.ca	Stanley.Varnhagen@ualberta.ca
780-471-7072	780-492-3641

Background

- You are being asked to be in this study because you are a NAIT instructor who has taught online courses.
- The results of this study will be used in a research project in support of the researcher's graduate degree from the University of Alberta.

Purpose

- The purpose of this project is to study NAIT students' and instructors' attitudes towards rapport in an online class.
- In this study the term rapport is used in the same context as relationship building. Students may build rapport (or build relationships) with other students or their instructors. Attitudes towards building both types of relationships will be examined.

Study Procedures

- This study will involve face to face interviews with students enrolled in an online course. An instructor of an online course will also be interviewed.
- Your participation in the project would involve meeting with the researcher in person for an interview for no longer than 60 minutes.
- The interview will consist of open-ended questions. The questions will include asking about your thoughts and opinions of online learning and teaching. You will have the chance to ask any questions and to decline answering any questions you wish.
- If needed the researcher may arrange a brief follow-up interview (no more than 20-30 minutes) or contact you by e-mail to answer any questions arising out the interview and subsequent data collection.

Benefits

- There is no direct benefit to the participant for being in the study.
- The information from doing this study will hopefully help instructors better understand students' attitudes towards rapport. This will help instructors meet the expectations of students.
- There is no cost to you for your participation in the study.

Risk

- There are no foreseeable risks to being involved in this study.

Voluntary Participation

- You are under no obligation to participate in this study. Participation is completely voluntary. You should not feel any obligation to participate. The researcher is prepared to approach others, should this not work.
- Even if you agree to be in the study you can change your mind and withdraw at any time.
- There are no penalties or consequences for withdrawing from this project. During the interview you may request to stop the interview at any time. You may withdraw your data from the project any time up until two weeks after your interview. If you withdraw, any data collected from you will be destroyed (hard copy interview transcripts) and deleted (digital audio files).

Confidentiality & Anonymity

- The results of this research will be used primarily for completing project requirements. A summary of the results may also be shared with NAIT. The results may also be used in presentations and research articles.   Neither you nor the students would be identified in any of these.
- All data gathered for this study will be kept confidential with only the researcher and the supervisor able to access your personal data. Your name will not be associated with any quotation and all personal identifiable information will be removed from quotations.
- The researcher will endeavour to protect your anonymity, but given the small size of the population, anonymity cannot be guaranteed.
- Research data will be kept electronically by the researcher for a period of five years following the completion of the study. All electronic data will be password protected and encrypted and stored on the researcher's computer on a password protected account. Names and identifying information will not be included in the transcripts.
- The data from this study may be used in future research, but to do this it will have to be approved by a Research Ethics Board.

Further Information
If you have any further questions regarding this study, please do not hesitate to contact:

Carrie Vos
E-mail: carriev@nait.ca
Phone: 780.471.7072

The plan for this study has been reviewed for its adherence to ethical guidelines by a Research Ethics Board at the University of Alberta. For questions regarding participant rights and ethical conduct of research, contact U of A Research Ethics Office at 780.492.2615

This research has been reviewed and approved by the NAIT Research Ethics Board. If you have any questions or concerns about ethical matters, you may contact Dr. Melissa Dobson, Chair of the NAIT Research Ethics Board at REB@nait.ca or 780.378.5185.

Signatures - Written Consent

Your signature on this form indicates that you

1) Understand to your satisfaction the information provided to you about your participation in this research project.
2) You agree to participate in the study.

In no way does this waive your legal rights nor release the investigators, sponsors, or involved institutions from their legal and professional responsibilities. You are free to withdraw from this research project at any time. You may feel free to ask for clarification or new information throughout your participation.

Participant's Name: (please print) _____

Participant's Signature: _____Date: _____

Researcher's Name: (please print) _____

Researcher's Signature: _____Date:_____

Appendix F: Student Information Letter and Consent Form

Study Title: Instructor and Students' Attitudes towards Rapport Building in Online Courses

Research Investigator:
Carrie Vos
NAIT
11762 106 Street Northwest
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780-471-7072

Supervisor:
Dr. Stanley Varnhagen
University of Alberta
10230 - Jasper Ave
Edmonton, AB, T5J 4P6
Stanley.Varnhagen@ualberta.ca
780-492-3641

Background
- You are being asked to be in this study because you are a NAIT student enrolled in an online course.
- The results of this study will be used in a research project in support of the researcher's Communications and Technology graduate degree from the University of Alberta.
- NAIT was chosen for this study since the researcher is an instructor in the Engineering Design and Drafting Technology program at NAIT

Purpose
- The purpose of this project is to explore NAIT students' and instructors' attitudes towards rapport in an online course.
- In this study the term rapport is used in the same context as relationship building. Students may build rapport (or build relationships) with other students or their instructors. Attitudes towards building both types of relationships will be examined.

Study Procedures
- This study will involve face to face interviews with students enrolled in an online course. An instructor of an online course will also be interviewed.
- Your participation in the project would involve meeting with the researcher in person for an interview for no longer than 60 minutes.
- The interview will be held at a time and location which is convenient for the participant.
- The interview will consist of open-ended questions. The questions will include asking about your thoughts and opinions of online learning. You will have the chance to ask any questions and to decline answering any questions you wish.
- If needed the researcher may arrange a brief follow-up interview (no more than 20-30 minutes) or contact you by e-mail to answer any questions arising out the interview and subsequent data collection.

Benefits
- There is no direct benefit to the participant for being in the study.
- The information from doing this study will hopefully help instructors better understand students' attitudes towards rapport. This will help instructors meet the expectations of students.
- There is no cost to you for your participation in the study and you will receive a $25 gift card as a token of appreciation.

Risk
- There are no foreseeable risks to being involved in this study.

Voluntary Participation
- You are under no obligation to participate in this study. Participation is completely voluntary.
- Even if you agree to be in the study you can change your mind and withdraw at any time.
- There are no penalties or consequences for withdrawing from this project. You will still receive a $25 gift card for meeting with the researcher. During the interview you may request to stop the interview at any time. Your data may be withdrawn from the project any time up until two weeks after your interview. If you withdraw, any data collected from you will be destroyed (hard copy interview transcripts) and deleted (digital audio files).

Confidentiality & Anonymity
- The results of this research will be used primarily for completing project requirements. A summary of the results may also be shared with NAIT. The results may also be used in presentations and research articles. Neither you nor the instructor would be identified in any of these.
- All data gathered for this study will be kept confidential with only the researcher and the supervisor able to access your personal data. Your name will not be associated with any quotation and all personal identifiable information will be removed from quotations.
- The researcher will endeavour to protect your anonymity. The students and the instructor participating in the study will not be told who the other participants are.
- Research data will be kept electronically by the researcher for a period of five years following the completion of the study. All electronic data will be password protected and encrypted and stored on the researcher's computer on a password protected account. Names and identifying information will not be included in the transcripts.
- The data from this study may be used in future research, but to do this it will have to be approved by a Research Ethics Board.

Further Information
If you have any further questions regarding this study, please do not hesitate to contact:
    Carrie Vos
    E-mail: carriev@nait.ca
    Phone: 780.471.7072

The plan for this study has been reviewed for its adherence to ethical guidelines by a Research Ethics Board at the University of Alberta. For questions regarding participant rights and ethical conduct of research, contact U of A Research Ethics Office at 780.492.2615

This research has been reviewed and approved by the NAIT Research Ethics Board. If you have any questions or concerns about ethical matters, you may contact Dr. Melissa Dobson, Chair of the NAIT Research Ethics Board at REB@nait.ca or 780.378.5185.

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Signatures - Written Consent

Your signature on this form indicates that you
3) Understand to your satisfaction the information provided to you about your participation in this research project.
4) You agree to participate in the study.

In no way does this waive your legal rights nor release the investigators, sponsors, or involved institutions from their legal and professional responsibilities. You are free to withdraw from this research project at any time. You may feel free to ask for clarification or new information throughout your participation.

Participant's Name: (please print) _____

Participant's Signature: _____Date: _____

Researcher's Name: (please print) _____

Researcher's Signature: _____Date:_____

Appendix G: Instructor Interview Transcript

Interviewer: How many face to face and online courses have you instructed within the last three years?

Instructor: Two online.

Interviewer: So then are you fully loaded otherwise with face to face courses?

Yes. I don't have a download. I had some download three years ago as a new instructor.

Interviewer: So then you've been teaching three years?

Instructor: Yes.

Interviewer: What type of non-course related information do you share in your online courses? Examples can be personal anecdotes, instructor introduction or bio, anything not pertinent to the course material?

Instructor: I certainly include a bio in the Moodle. One of the first things I have there is an introduction to instructors. So I have a personal bio there. As we go through the courses I don't hesitate to share personal like you say anecdotes based on previous work experience to try and make it more real for the students. I think in particular if I know that if I share something with them, work experience in a related field or something like that I bring that related work experience and feedback to them on what they submit to me.

Interviewer: So it would be as you see fit, as you are moving through the course?

Instructor: Yes, definitely on an ad hoc basis. There is nothing that I other than the first bio that I provide on a regular basis to them as part of the course.

Interviewer: So that is a written bio in Moodle?

Yes.

Interviewer: Can you tell me about what methods you have used within your online courses to connect with and share non-course related information with students? So like we talked about the bio or do you do any introduction videos when they start the course? Or do you do any introduction emails or videos, feedback through email?

Instructor: I don't contact them by email, no - all our contact is through Moodle. The only exception would be we do have Connect sessions but that is integrated through Moodle as well.

Interviewer: So it that a Q and A, or a lecture?

Instructor: It is a case study that we have them all participate in and that is one opportunity where we do have a chance to hear each other's voice and relate more on a personal level because we set up a scenario for them to work through. We have a PowerPoint where we set up the scenario for them and get them to start working in a team to investigate an incident and we coach them through and provide direction and that would be one opportunity for them to hear a little bit more about me as an instructor. The other thing I'm thinking about is also identifying myself though a picture posting and not just a bio - the written words - but I think it makes a big difference if they have a mental picture of the instructor so I post my picture as well.

Interviewer: Do students post photos?

Instructor: Sometimes. What I've seen recently is about half and half. So to me it makes a big difference. I appreciate it when students post photos of themselves. So I can have a mental picture as to who I am corresponding with. I've never gotten any feedback from them on my picture or the fact that it is posted there. But I have that available in Moodle.

Interviewer: So of those that we just spoke about like the Connect sessions, which of these do you use most frequently? So you've taught two online courses, is there anything that you've added since your first course to your second course?

Instructor: I don't think so. No. But again if I have been teaching this for many, many years I would see a progression. In regards to email again it is not something formally that I do but once my email is available to students it is interesting to see how some students connect with me through that and then we do continue the conversations offline through email. With some students it is very intense, ongoing emails back and forth and most students I never from that way at all.

Interviewer: Do they email you through the Moodle email or do they find your email address off your contact information and email you directly?

Instructor: It would be directly. Much more so than through Moodle. In my bio I say if you have any questions please feel free to contact me at my email address and that is what they use. Very rarely is it though Moodle.

Interviewer: Can you tell me how you try to get students to share information or interact with you and/or the rest of the class?

Instructor: That's the very first thing that we have them do in the online course is introductions so either through a journal or in this case for them to get to know each other it would have to be through a Moodle discussion. Setting up through Moodle discussions - introduce yourself to the rest of the group and then answer this question so people can see how others in the group answer the question. We do want to make sure right at the start that they have an opportunity to understand who else is in the class, the virtual class.

Interviewer: What does the term rapport mean to you?

Instructor: Rapport to me means getting to know somebody other than in a social setting. Understanding where they're coming from in their answers because of their previous experiences. Being able to talk to somebody less formally.

Interviewer: For this study I'm using the term rapport as building personal connections between instructors and students as well between students, so similar to your definition, as well as between students themselves. How would you relate the importance of rapport relative to other aspects of a course?

Instructor: Sure, so resources versus rapport. I think rapport is huge whether you are just providing contact or connecting with the student in building that rapport can significantly influence students' learning. I believe because they have that option to come to you if they have built up that rapport that you've established with them to seek clarification, to know that it is safe for them to approach you, to take the time and get questions answered that they have. I think if that rapport is not there if they feel that they cannot approach you I think that it would negatively affect their learning.

Interviewer: How does rapport building work in your face to face classes?

Instructor: I think it starts right from the very first class with them where I discuss my expectations and ask them for their expectations in terms of talking about that relationship between the instructor and the students, and between each student. We talk about classroom expectations and terms such as safety, so they should all feel safe to express whatever their opinions are and no one is going to be belittling each other and I try to build rapport with them by getting to know each student as an individual - so starting right with their names and just taking the time to talk to them at the start of classes about what their issues are and what they have been up to, the night before, the weekend, and building rapport so that they again feel confident to come and talk to me.

Interviewer: So now in your online courses how does rapport building work?

Instructor: Not nearly as well, it's absolutely very restricted, based on my experiences, to build anything close to what you can in the face to face learning environment.

Interviewer: What do you see as the differences between rapport building in a face to face course as opposed to an online course?

Instructor: Definitely, in the online course you don't have the opportunity to see to individual to read their facial expressions and I don't know how else to express that but by not having that face to face I think you do lose a lot of the opportunity to build that rapport and build on the conversations. Your communication opportunities are much more limited. Just reading brief text about what they want to share is very restrictive and you can only do that so many times whereas

in face to face you can ask them every morning how their day is going and build the rapport that way. I don't think that you have as many opportunities or as many different methods to build rapport in online versus face to face.

Interviewer: How would describe the importance of developing rapport with students in an online course?

Instructor: I've been thinking about that and I don't know if it is as important, but if it isn't as important I don't know why it wouldn't be. I know that when I've had a chance to build rapport because we've taken a discussion offline and started having the email conversations on a regular basis again I saw value in that and obviously the questions were there and I was able to help that student through everything that they were dealing with. So I think there is value in building that rapport as much as possible and I wish there was more opportunities to do that in an online environment.

Interviewer: How would you describe your rapport with students in your online courses?

Instructor: Limited. Distant. Minimal.

Interviewer: Is there anything you would like to add about rapport's role in your classes?

Instructor: I think as we talked about, rapport between student and instructor is extremely important -especially starting right up front. Continuing right though school or the course session and if there was more opportunities to that in an online environment I think it would be beneficial for everybody.

Appendix H: Student Interview Transcript

Interviewer: How many online courses have you taken within the last three years?

Student: I'm not sure in the last three, but I started my program five years ago and it has been 19 courses. My entire program is online.

Student: It would be five.

Interviewer: How many face to face courses have you taken within the last three years?

Student: My entire diploma program was face to face.

Student: None.

Interviewer: Why did you choose to take your courses and your program online?

Student: I worked fulltime and it was only for self-interest. I've found it is an option for more flexibility.

Student: Just ease of convenience. I'm working fulltime now and the choice to go back to school was - I feel I was going to be a student forever. It was just hard to give up working fulltime.

Interviewer: Can you tell me how your online instructors have shared non-course related information? (Examples if needed: introduction emails or videos, feedback through email)

Student: Yup, just that. There is always introductions at the beginning of the semester or the class I'm taking. It's pretty standard. And then a lot of the time there is a lot of email communication or even phone calls if I'm not getting this and I'm having a hard time or whatever the case is they relate personal experience and how we can apply it that way. So it is not all textbook.

Student: I would say so far email seems to be the most common method, or the Moodle portals, stuff like that. There has been a few of my instructors that have used the Adobe recorded sessions. They will do lessons from the chapter and then post them.

Interviewer: Which of those were used most frequently?

Student: Probably email. So conversing that way and getting feedback.

Student: Email for sure.

Interviewer: Can you tell me about how your instructor(s) asked you to use to share information or interact with the rest of the class? (examples if needed: introduction forum posts, group chats)

Student: We all had to introduce ourselves and every post we had to make, we also had to reply to two or three other posts, and then respond back to replies on our posts. And we had group work as well. There was some people I developed relationships with and we actually still talk to this day and get together so it has develop into like non-related. A few of us that live in close proximity would meet and just continue working it out.

Student: Yes, so every course starts out with an introduction that is all run through the Moodle forum posts and it is basically outlined in the course guidelines that you are expected to reply to so many people's posts to engage in communication that way. You post and they would have a list of three to five questions and you are supposed to tell everyone about yourself and usually what you want to get out of the course, or where you are from, your background. And they kind of leave it open for you just to divulge what you want. With Moodle your profile picture shows or you could upload a picture, or you have the option to. So that's there. My most recent course we were doing PowerPoint introductions, and there was no criteria and so you didn't have to upload a photo but I chose to.

Student: In some of them we had to form groups so it is just going out on a limb and looking at the course list of students and kind of randomly picking and trying to get some sort of communication going that way. And then there has been the more formal assigned groups where they provide you with a student's Moodle name so you can connect and get a group project started.

Interviewer: Think of the activities you've used to share non-course related material. Which activities do you prefer and why?

Student: I think the online posts, the posting and then having to give feedback. Just like, "Oh, nice article", but they actually had to put some thought into it because they were being graded. So I like that the best because that is about the most communication you are going to get online.

Student: I guess the introductions, some of the group projects are not my favorite, it's just really hard to organize a project online and get everyone interfacing especially when everyone is in different time zones and locations, that kind of thing. So I would just say that the single project aspects are what I prefer.

Interviewer: What do you think about sharing non-course related material in your online courses?

Student: It makes it more personal, showing that they can relate to us. I think they actually care as well.

Student: I think it is good. It makes you more vulnerable and open to more feedback. I guess learning and not necessary criticism, but criticism in constructive ways can make yourself better. If you are not vulnerable, you kind of put up a bit of a guard and you can't learn as well or get better than as you are.

Interviewer: What does the term rapport mean to you? A common way of using the term is 'rapport building' which is often between a sales person and a client.

Student: To me rapport is just building that relationship so in this case is between student and teachers so that you feel confident enough that you're going to ask them the questions when you are having difficulties. Especially with online courses where a lot of it is self-directed studies so I wouldn't say you get a lot of guidance and it is a lot of assignment readings and reflect back. So if you are struggling you would really need that rapport with your teacher and I guess fellow students as well so you can actually grasp the concepts of what is happening and feel comfortable and engaging in that conversation and start asking those questions.

Interviewer: How would you describe your experience with online courses and how might that affect rapport?

Student: I feel with online studies it is hard, really hard to build rapport with your teacher and students because, like I said, everyone is so all over the place and so disconnected. And you know, half the time when I sign in I'm the only one logged in out of a class of fifty students so that there is not always someone there to immediately to chat with or connect with. In my experience I think the few teachers that I've had I feel they are disconnected from the group. So I feel that it is very challenging. Especially we just had to do a group project and trying to engage four students who are all over the province and meet expectations and deliverables was a bit challenging. Especially when you are relying solely on technology for your communication.

Interviewer: How would you describe your rapport with other students in your online courses?

Student: I'd say it's okay. It could be better, just like I said the communication aspect's hard. The group project that we had, out of the four, I felt that I was good with three of them, but we had one individual in our group who was totally disconnected for the entire project so you cannot build rapport when they were never there. Once we got into a kind of a niche and got comfortable with where everyone was at and what everyone's thoughts were on the project, it was really good. It was easy to communicate openly with the group. I also had a couple of friends in the class so it was easy to kind of bounce ideas off them and see what classes they were enrolled in and what they were taking, and their thoughts on instructors. Then they can also provide insight as to which instructor replies best to email and this one you are more easily to get a hold of through Moodle or vice versa. So that way it's nice as well. I think now after building that rapport with that group and seeing their names pop up in some additional online courses I'll be more apt to talk to them and ask them questions as well. I mean it is a four year degree program so you start to see familiar faces.

Student: Very good. Even the students who were kind of slackers I always gave the benefit of the doubt. I never had a problem with anybody in any of my classes, including my instructors.

Interviewer: How do you feel this rapport (or personal connection) developed?

Student: A lot of it started with face to face group projects in my diploma program and now with my five courses and now with my online program I'm just starting to see familiar names. So we commonly reply back to each other's posts and offer insight on certain things so we kind of find patterns and know who to go talk to.

Student: By showing an interest in other people. People like talking about themselves in general. So you always ask questions about them and then make it personal about them, their experiences, their posts. Offer a hand when you can.

Interviewer: How would describe the importance of developing rapport with other students in an online course?

Student: I don't think it is super important, it's nice though. It makes things easier because we don't see each other. It's not like you are coming to a classroom and have that kind of family feel and you are always together and you're going through the program together. I don't think in online it is as important or maybe it is. I think building a good relationship with your instructor is more important for online purposes.

Student: It is pretty important just to get feedback on the projects and your assignments and stuff like that in case you are unable to get a hold of your teacher. I've had a few of those where they are not necessarily able to respond right away so you're kind of waiting to hear and the deadline is getting closer so it is easier sometimes if you know a friendly face just to pop the question to them and they might have an idea. So I would say it is pretty important.

Interviewer: How about with your instructor? Do you have a personal connection with them?

Student: In my online courses I would say no. I found it rather difficult and them not being very receptive to questions sometimes. Sometimes I feel like they are just overwhelmed. Instead of me having one instructor they have fifty students they are trying to attend to. I feel that maybe time constraints and that they are teaching face to face courses as well so I feel that it is kind of limited.

Student: I would say with most of them it was really good and there really wasn't room for improvement. But I can think of one instance where it was a lot of, and it's the whole trying to read a text message or an email. You don't know the tone. So picking up the phone would have definitely helped build the relationship or the rapport. Where I really thought this person was kind of a jerk, just short answers and even I guess just giving this person the benefit of the doubt. It's hard online.

Interviewer: How do you feel this rapport (personal connection) developed?

Student: I've met a lot of instructors. I'm open to activities that they have going on. They always ask, "Would you like to join us?" and I always take advantage of the opportunities that are presented – I'm always putting myself out there.

Interviewer: How would you describe the importance of developing rapport with your instructor?

Student: I think it is very important because they are the ones that point you in the right direction and they are the ones that are giving you feedback.

Student: I think it is more important than with other students. You need to clearly understand what is expected of you in the project or the course. If you don't have that rapport it is hard to communicate effectively with your instructor and it is hard to meet those expectations.

Interviewer: Considering what we've discussed about rapport in an online setting, how does it compare to how rapport works in a face to face classroom?

Student: I think the rapport itself is the same, developing the rapport is different. It is way easier face to face when you can actually communicate with a person on a daily basis. You know where their office is and you have the ability to walk down the hallway to go and speak to them. It is a lot easier to get that connection going. Whereas in the online courses it is difficult sometimes because sometimes instructors never look at email and then you don't get a response until the next day or a few days, or in the middle of the night. So you are constantly waiting and it is the lag time between responses and that communication that really makes it hard because it is not just a face to face conversation. The lag time is really huge.

Interviewer: Do you have anything you would like to add about building rapport in your classes online?

Student: Not that I can think about off the top of my head. I think that it is important, but more important with instructors. They are the ones grading you and they are the ones you are learning from. And to some degree with the students it is very import ant too. I have really good friends now from online classes and mentoring other students who are still in classes that I've already taken and helping them through it. It is helpful to go to someone who has been in that position.

Student: Not necessarily. I think that to me it is just that communication and that ease of communication, making sure that you are able to have that ability to speak with your instructor and building that relationship is the key thing. The communication just weighs heavily on that I think. I definitely feel that online is more of a challenge than face to face. I think as a student you just learn to work with it and you have to adapt your style of learning to work with those challenges to be successful.