R·I·T

TEACHING ELEMENTS: STUDENT-STUDENT INTERACTION ONLINE
BUILDING RAPPORT IN ONLINE COURSES

1.0 | OCTOBER 2014

Asking questions, sharing perspectives, and examining differences in opinions are all fundamental learning activities. If students are going to feel comfortable engaging in these types of exchanges online, there must be a strong level of rapport to provide a foundation for a high level of student-to-student interaction in online courses. Instructors can support rapport-building by providing socially-focused exchanges such as:

- Guided introductions

- Exchanges of personal information

- Activities designed to increase social rapport

These socially-focused exchanges are building blocks—a course will need a number of them for students to truly develop rapport. For example, a course should include at least introductions and the exchange of personal information before students collaborate on medium- to high-stakes assignments.

STUDENT INTRODUCTIONS

A defined introduction is a good starting point for building student rapport. Introductions may be in the form of a required discussion or through an activity designed to let students learn about one another personally and professionally.

Some best practices for online introductions are:

- Keep the focus on the students (versus the course content).

- Go beyond asking students to share basic information. For example, use an activity that requires students to read one another's' introductions to identify common patterns or experiences.

- Give course credit for participation.

- Introduce yourself in the same forum to model the expected and appropriate amount of personal information and disclosure, and to demonstrate rapport-building behaviors with responses such as "nice to meet you" and "I have also visited France" as students post their introductions.

Introduction discussion-starters, questions, and activities include:

- Describe your most frightening moment.

- What are you most looking forward to in the class and what are you least looking forward to?

- What are three interesting things about yourself that you'd like to share?

- Locate and share three to five images (photos, drawings, etc.) that reflect who you are.

- What is one thing you love to do and do well?

- What is one thing that you love to do and would like to be able to do better?

- Complete the following sentences with at least three and no more than 10 short phrases.
  I am _____. I am not _____.

RAPPORT-BUILDING ACTIVITIES

One phrase

Open a discussion forum instructing students to:

- Develop a phrase that well-reflects who you are. For example, "Outrageously curious" or "laid back."

- Read your classmates' phrases and find at least three that interest you. Contact those classmates to learn more about why they described themselves with their chosen phrases.

- "Introduce" at least two of those classmates to the rest of the class by describing what you have learned about that person.

Exchange of personal information

Ask students to complete written or video bio to facilitate the exchange of personal and professional information, based on a format you define. For example, you can ask students to complete their myCourses Profile and then engage them in an activity to explore each other's profiles. One way to do this is to ask students to identify two classmates whose favorite quotations resonates with them and ask those students why they selected the quotation. Then ask students to share what they have learned to the rest of the class.

Favorite website/app orientation

In a discussion forum, ask each student to identify a favorite website or app that they frequently visit or use, and develop a short introduction to it, including (for example):

- How they first discovered it

- An explanation of what it offers

- Why it appeals to them

- The benefits they get from it

Other students can reply with their own experiences and impressions.

OTHER SUPPORT FOR RAPPORT-BUILDING

There are other methods to support on-going rapport building during the class:

- Design discussion questions that encourage students to share relevant experiences and examples.

- Assign students as facilitators of weekly discussions.

- Continually model appropriate disclosure and interaction by frequently responding to student posts and sharing your own examples and experiences.