Chapter 2
Creating Meaningful Relationships in the Online Environment:
Building Rapport With the Adult Learner

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ABSTRACT

Online education for adult learners is increasing at astonishing rates faster than previously imagined. Research conducted by Snyder, Brey, and Dillow revealed that the percentage of students who participate in at least one online class increased from 15.6% in 2004 to 43.1% in 2016. Because of this phenomenon, the ability to connect with students is at the forefront for creating a successful experience. This chapter will identify the purpose and approaches to building positive relationships and strengthening rapport in the online environment. Not only would these strategies provide guidance in the traditional classroom setting, but they are especially beneficial in the virtual world when engagement is the key to success.

INTRODUCTION

As many institutions of higher education begin to shift their educational environment from a traditional approach to a more inclusive environment, online education has found its way to the forefront of adult learning (Diaz-Infante et al., 2022). Adults no longer have the frustration of finding appropriate programs that fit into their busy lives and schedules, for today, many institutions of higher learning offer flexibility in asynchronous and/or synchronous learning platforms (Chen et al., 2005). With the many options now available, online learners should reflect not only the classroom assignments required for submission in their online portal but should also consider the other areas needed for a successful online experience, many of which are not necessarily taught in the classroom setting. The concepts of building positive relationships, establishing rapport with peers and professors, and appropriate communication

are all areas needed when deciding if the online environment is the most appropriate fit for the adult learner (Glazier, 2020).

As adults, there are certain expectations when interacting with others, whether it be in an online environment, a phone conversation, or in a face-to-face meeting. Regardless of the format of the interaction, rapport and effective communication are two attributes that are essential for a successful relationship. When adult learners are taking a class in an online environment, some of the reasons could be that the learner is a career switcher, a nontraditional student, or a student who prefers the flexibility that the platform allows. For the purposes of this paper, The National Center for Education Statistics (2020) defined the nontraditional student as one who meets one or more of the following criteria:

- Delays enrollment (does not enter postsecondary education in the same calendar year that he or she finished high school)
- Attends part-time for at least part of the academic year
- Works full-time (35 hours or more per week) while enrolled
- Is considered financially independent for purposes of determining eligibility for financial aid
- Has dependents other than a spouse (usually children, but sometimes others);
- Is a single parent (either not married or married but separated and has dependents), or
- Does not have a high school diploma (completed high school with a GED or other high school completion certificate or did not finish high school) (pp. 2-3).

As more and more adults choose to take advanced classes in this nontraditional mode, it is more important than ever for those instructing to understand how best to meet all of their students' needs to gain the most effective results, one of which is the value of relationships.

POSITIVE RELATIONSHIPS IN THE ONLINE CLASSROOM

Dr. Sheehan Fisher (2022) defined a positive relationship as any relationship that is "shared between any two people who support, encourage, and help each other practically as well as emotionally" (para 6). The author further stated that the most important variable is healthy communication. A positive relationship in the classroom is essential in creating a safe and enjoyable learning environment. It allows the students to feel loved, striving to perform their very best, because they know the teacher cares about them. When students feel cared for, it pushes them to try harder, they feel comfortable participating in classroom discussions and activities, and they are more likely to take academic risks (Thomas, 2021). In the traditional, face-to-face environment, students love to see their teachers at their sporting events or other extracurricular activities after school. That *extra step* taken by their teacher shows them how important they are inside *and* outside of the classroom. The feeling of pride and the sense that they truly are important gives them confidence, oftentimes encouraging them try harder in the classroom to please their teacher. Not only does showing up at after school events create that feeling of a positive relationship, but simple phone calls home also have a similar effect (Boyd, 2017). For PK-12 students in a brick and mortar, It is inevitable that a teacher will need to call home for areas of concern from time to time. An effective way to balance mental health and potential burnout for the teacher is to practice calling home for positive reasons, too. The positive phone calls home should also exceed the number of negative phone calls home. This allows the teacher to address potential escalating issues by garnering

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