

ATHABASCA UNIVERSITY

INSTRUCTOR BEHAVIOURS THAT ENHANCE STUDENT-INSTRUCTOR  
RAPPORT IN UNDERGRADUATE E-LEARNING.

BY

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The future of learning.

## Approval of Thesis

The undersigned certify that they have read the thesis entitled

**“Instructor Behaviours that Enhance Student-instructor Rapport in Undergraduate E-Learning”**

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In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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### **Abstract**

Research into the subject of rapport in an e-learning environment is limited. This research set out to further understand instructor behaviours that enhance student-instructor rapport in undergraduate e-learning at a Canadian Virtual University. Through a mixed-methodology the lived experiences of undergraduate students were examined. Based on the results the following are recommendations for those who would like to further develop their rapport building skills in an e-learning environment. Demonstrate understanding by providing constructive feedback; encourage your students with positive feedback. To demonstrate that you care, be helpful and reach out to students; to be fair, be transparent in your grading and provide feedback for improvement. Respect is demonstrated through professional, respectful communication that values the student's experience. It is earned by being responsive and demonstrating your knowledge. Posting and keeping office hours, responding to inquiries (emails) quickly, clearly and fully all contribute to high-quality communication and enhance student-instructor rapport.

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## **Chapter 1**

### **Statement of the Problem**

#### **Statement of the Problem**

Instructing in an e-learning context is a dynamic process that usually involves the building of the student-instructor relationship without the constraints or advantages of time or location, through hard copy print materials (study guides, text books, and articles) as well as telephone and computer mediated communications (CMC). This relationship, characterized by the term *rapport*, has been studied in face-to-face education and found to have a positive impact on students' academic behaviour (Wilson, Ryan, & Pugh, 2011). Further outcomes of rapport, gathered from past research on rapport in a variety of disciplines including psychology, marketing, and education, by Granitz, Koernig and Harich (2009), include: task success, higher motivation, increased comfort, customization, loyalty, increased quality, satisfaction, higher evaluations, word-of-mouth, better relationship, enhanced communication, and trust (pp. 54-55). The nature of the problem is that, at present, there has been very limited research into the experience of rapport, from either the students' or the instructors' perspectives, in e-learning (Lammers & Gillaspay, Jr., 2013). E-learning presents the new reality of rapport being developed mainly with the use of technology. According to Lammers (2014), "For online courses, what is different is that certain modes of interaction that are technologically based become more prominent in the development of rapport" (B. Lammers, personal communication, February 20, 2014). This research sets out to answer the question of how instructors might improve rapport in a distance learning environment.

It is important to clarify the definition of rapport being used in this research. In surveying numerous articles and definitions it is this one, provided by Dr. Bill Lammers (2014), that will be used: “Positive rapport, from the perspective of the student, exists when the student believes that his/her instructor is understanding, encouraging, caring, fair, communicative, respectful, and approachable” (personal communication, February 20, 2014). Further elaboration on definitions of rapport in education will be provided in the literature review section of the thesis. E-learning and the context in which it is used in this thesis are discussed below. A glossary of terms will be included in the thesis.

### **Significance of the Research**

Online learning or e-learning are ubiquitous terms. To provide context to this discussion, the terms *online learning* and *e-learning* are used to reflect the breadth of the experience of learning at a location other than a face-to-face institution. Here is a snapshot of the experiences I encountered as a graduate student at a Canadian virtual university:

- Learning and content management system known as Moodle accessed via a website, which became the link to my instructors and fellow learners
- Text books (print only)
- Study guides (both print and e-formats)
- Research and journal articles (both print and e-formats)
- Discussion forums (both graded and un-graded)
- Annotated discussion forum (encountered once)
- Skype calls, both individual and group
- Email (one to one with Instructors, fellow students, and administration)
- Short video messages of introduction (both from instructors and fellow students)
- Study buddies
- Group assignments (from 3 to 5 participants)
- Links to articles, websites, and tools
- Phone conversations with instructors



- Webinars with guest speakers with 20 to 60 participants
- A wide array of assignments that allowed for individual curiosity to drive choice while being held to a high educational standard
- Individualized feedback on assignments
- Collaborative tools to complete group assignments
- Administrative support (both self-serve and in response to questions)
- Access to tax forms and receipts on demand
- A full academic library that can send hard copy books that are easy to return as well as provides access to a host of research journals that can be searched and saved
- The experience of one on one versus one of many (as experienced in undergraduate studies)
- No lectures
- Never met an instructor or classmate in the M.Ed. program face-to-face
- Of my 7 courses only one was taught by core faculty
- Never attended the campus of Athabasca University or any other face to face meeting with Athabasca staff or students
- Never encountered line ups, or delays in getting support with administrative issues such as paying tuition, accessing grades or changing addresses
- Flexibility in adjusting deadlines due to work and life commitments

The above list is shared to illustrate that the experience of e-learning can be, a robust, multi-leveled, multi-channelled form of education. It reflects my own experience, and may not be typical of all student experiences. While I never met any of my instructors face to face, there was, in many instances, a high degree of instructor-student *rapport*. Rapport contributed greatly to my learning and persistence. To return to our definition, rapport developed when I experienced understanding, encouragement, caring, fairness, communication, respect and approachability from/with instructors. All of this happened at a distance, facilitated by computers, internet, mail and telephone technology.

**Purpose of study**

The purpose of this study is to identify, from the students' perspective, instructor behaviours that enhance or diminish student-instructor rapport in an e-learning environment. This will contribute to the research on rapport by providing insight into how instructor behaviours translate into the experience of rapport for students.

**The Quantitative.**

Dr. Lammers, of the University of Central Arkansas, developed the SIRS-9 Rapport Scale. The SIRS-9 quantifies rapport through the answer to nine questions that are responded to using a 5-Point Likert-type scale. In summary form, the questions relate to the following: Does your instructor...understand you, encourage you, care about you, treat you fairly, communicate effectively with you, respect you and have they earned your respect? (Lammers & Gillaspay, Jr., 2013). A further comparison of the SIRS-9 and other measures of rapport will be carried out in the literature review section of the thesis. Please see appendix A for the original SIRS-9 tool.

**The Qualitative.**

Murphy and Rodríguez-Manzanares (2012) provide great insight in to what online teachers in distance education high school setting view as rapport, using a qualitative method. They interviewed 42 Canadian high-school distance education teachers, and from those transcripts identified six categories, with 16 subcategories, of rapport building. Our research population is undergraduate students and different from

high school students, however they provide a role model for this type of qualitative inquiry. The study also provides a further 88 indicators of rapport, specific actions that teachers reported using. One example has been included in the listing below. The six categories and 16 subcategories are present in table 1 below.

Table 1	
<i>Indicators of rapport, categories and subcategories</i>	
Category	Subcategories
Recognizing the person/individual	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Eliciting personal information: <i>Indicator: Using chat to learn the attitudes, temperaments and likes and dislikes of students.</i></li> <li>• Expressing personality</li> <li>• Acknowledging the person</li> </ul>
Supporting and monitoring	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Supporting and monitoring</li> <li>• Praising</li> <li>• Providing feedback</li> </ul>
Availability, accessibility, and responsiveness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Being available</li> <li>• Responding quickly</li> </ul>
Non text-based interactions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Hearing each other</li> <li>• Seeing each other</li> <li>• Interacting in real-time, face-to-face</li> </ul>
Tone of interactions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Being friendly</li> <li>• Being humorous</li> <li>• Being respectful and honest</li> </ul>
Non-academic conversation/interactions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Conversing socially</li> <li>• Showing care and concern</li> </ul>
Murphy and Rodríguez-Manzanares (2012)	

**Research Questions**

1. Do undergraduate students perceive rapport with instructors in undergraduate e-learning?
2. If students do perceive rapport in an online setting, what instructor behaviors enhance student-instructor rapport in undergraduate e-learning?

**Limitations**

Limitations are acknowledged to be those influences that the researcher cannot control. These include the overall number of survey responses, and the departments that agreed to participate in the study by sending the survey request to their undergraduate students.

**Delimitations**

The timing of the launch and completion of the survey was crafted to take into consideration the workload of undergraduate students. Undergraduates were selected over graduate students as the focus of this research as I have no experience as an undergraduate student in an e-learning environment. My undergraduate experience was at a traditional face to face university allowing me to experience the development of rapport, in that setting. The use of the SIRS-9 Tool allowed the research to focus on the experience of rapport instead of the development of a measure of rapport.

**Definition of Terms**

As part of this research involves the coding of survey responses, it is important to note that the use of dictionary definitions was used to refine, clarify, and capture the lived experiences of the respondents. Those definitions have been included here for clarity and shared understanding.

Communication: 1.2: The successful conveying or sharing of ideas and feelings: (Oxford Dictionary online).

Constructive: Having or intended to have a useful or beneficial purpose. (Oxford Dictionary online.)

Feedback: Information about reactions to a product, a person's performance of a task, etc. which is used as a basis for improvement: (Oxford Dictionary online).

Help: Make it easier or possible for (someone) to do something by offering them one's services or resources: (Oxford Dictionary online).

Instructor: a person who teaches something. (Oxford Dictionary online.)

Knowledge: Facts, information, and skills acquired through experience or education; the theoretical or practical understanding of a subject: (Oxford Dictionary online).

Positive: 1.1: Expressing or implying affirmation, agreement, or permission. 2. Constructive, optimistic, or confident (Oxford Dictionary online).

Rapport: “Positive rapport, from the perspective of the student, exists when the student believes that his/her instructor is understanding, encouraging, caring, fair, communicative, respectful, and approachable” (B. Lammers personal communication, February 20, 2014).

Responsive: 1.1 Responding readily and with interest: (Oxford Dictionary online).

Student: A person who is studying at a university or other place of higher education: (Oxford Dictionary online).

Thorough: Complete with regard to every detail; not superficial or partial: (Oxford Dictionary online).

## Chapter 2

### Literature Review

Research into rapport has continued to peel back the layers of this term allowing us to move from the nebulous to the quantifiable. Through this literature review I hope to demonstrate what we know about rapport in e-learning, what we don't know, and what we are curious about as it relates to the research question. It is important to note that the published research in this area is very limited (Lammers & Gillaspay Jr., 2013).

To begin, we start with a seminal article published in 1990 by Tickle-Degnan and Rosenthal. On the surface returning to an article published long before e-learning rose to its current position in education may seem counter-intuitive; however there are key concepts that inform the research in question.

Tickle-Degnan and Rosenthal (1990) report that individuals experience rapport "...as a result of a combination of qualities that emerge from each individual during interaction" (p. 286). They report that these qualities are expressed as "just clicking" or feeling good due to "chemistry". They state while some people may have a predisposition to developing rapport, it is not a personality trait, so this skill can be learned. From their research they conclude that *mutual attentiveness*, *positivity* and *co-ordination* are three essential components of the experience of rapport (p.286).

Our purpose is to develop our knowledge about human interaction in one of its most pleasant and influential forms. By understanding the nature of rapport, in terms of behavioural correlates, we may not only be able to demonstrate when an interaction demonstrates a high degree of rapport, but also how an interaction can

be nudged toward the production of this quality. (Tickle-Degnan and Rosenthal, 1990, p. 292)

While Tickle-Degnan and Rosenthal's research focused on the non-verbal correlates of rapport, such as directed gaze, smiling, nodding, leaning forward, body orientation, and posturing including mirroring, uncrossed legs and arms, much of which is not directly experienced in e-learning without synchronous technology, they laid the ground work for subsequent research into rapport (p. 290). "In contrast and without so stating, Tickle-Degnan and Rosenthal have set the stage for also investigating novel and unique aspects of rapport" (Altman, 1990, p. 296).

Murphy and Rodriguez-Manzanares (2012) provide us a summary based on the review of literature that represents the elements of rapport. "Rapport is a dyadic phenomenon that involves mutual attentiveness, respect, understanding, openness and coordinated interaction, movement that is positive, harmonious, smooth and regular." (p. 169)

In contrast to that, the definition of rapport provided by Dr. Lammers, and being used as the definition for this research, provides us with seven quantifiable variables of rapport, namely: understanding, encouraging, caring, fair, communicative, respectful and approachable.

## **Rapport**

Dr. Lammers's language of *positive rapport* connotes the possibility of negative rapport. The Oxford Dictionary online provides us with the following definition: *A close*



*and harmonious relationship in which the people or groups concerned understand each other's feelings or ideas and communicate well*, which by its' definition suggests that rapport is a positive experience. I agree, rapport by its definition and experience is positive and the use of the term positive rapport can be considered redundant.

Returning to Tickle-Degnan and Rosenthal they too reference this positive-negative dichotomy in the explanation of *mutual attentiveness*. "Mutual attentiveness may be negative, as when teenage boys confront one another in verbal combat, or positive as when boys engage in friendly banter" (Tickle-Degnan & Rosenthal, 1990, p. 291), and argue that both mutual attentiveness and positivity are necessary for the ready development of rapport. In a later section of their research Tickle-Degnan and Rosenthal refer to the stages of rapport development noting that in the early stages *positivity* behaviours are necessary, and in later stages *co-ordination* behaviours (p. 292). The implication is that rapport develops in stages with different behaviours required depending on the stage. In speaking directly of Tickle-Degnan and Rosenthal's research, Altman (1990) states, "...their multiple-component approach suggests the possibility of many patterns of rapport that occur uniquely at different stages of relationships and in different circumstances" (p. 296). It is this insight, that rapport is experienced to various degrees that makes the use of the SIRS-9 Rapport Scale an important tool to quantify the degree of experience of rapport in a student-instructor relationship.

### **SIRS-9 Tool**

Creasey, Jarvis and Knapcik (2009) published research related to the use of a tool they developed called the Student-Instructor Relationship Scale (SIRS). The 36-item

inventory uses a 7-point Likert type scale and is a “short survey to assess college student-instructor relationships from the student perspective...” (p. 2). In a study, 94 college students, ages 18 to 24, in a large Midwestern university, completed the SIRS twice, about 2 to 3 weeks apart. Within the results, factor analysis revealed two distinct domains: 1) connectedness towards the instructor (eleven items at the .50 or greater) and 2) anxiety related to instructor acceptance and worthiness as a student (eight items at .50 or greater). These two dimensions were labeled as Instructor Connectedness dimension and the Instructor Anxiety dimension (Creasey et al., p. 3). Within this study, these two major subscales “...were significantly related to important achievement orientations” (p. 5). These include self-directed learning, student efficacy and test anxiety, in a single classroom (p. 6). “Thus the study suggests that identifying the mechanisms that best predict the development of close, non-threatening relationships with instructors has valuable applied implications and fits with the larger mission of many academic institutions across the nation.” (Creasey et al., 2009, p. 5)

The Student-Instructor Rapport Scale (SIRS-9) was developed in 2012 by Dr. Lammers after a review of rapport scales used in other relationship contexts such as teacher-child, instructor-student, therapist-client, employer-employee and married couples. (Lammers & Gillaspay Jr., 2013, p.4) The SIRS-9 is designed in the spirit of the SIRS with nine easy to administer questions on a 5 point Likert type scale. Using the SIRS-9 and the 11 item Connectedness subscale of the SIRS, Lammers and Gillaspay Jr. out about to study the link between student-instructor rapport and an objective measure (grades) of student learning in an e-learning context. The procedure was clear, all

instructors (at all levels, undergraduate, graduate etc.) teaching on-line were asked to send an invitation to an online survey to their students. The researchers then requested final grades from instructors (based on a participant identification number) for those students who had participated. The results:

Relatively few scales have been developed to specifically measure student-instructor rapport and the initial data for the SIRS-9 developed for this study are encouraging. The brief 9-item scale showed excellent internal consistency ( $\alpha = .95$ ), strong concurrent validity with the SIRS-Connectedness subscale developed by Creasey, Jarvis & Knapcik (2009), and strong predictive validity regarding student course evaluation (course quality, instructor quality, perceived learning) and student course grades. (Lammers and Gillaspay Jr., 2013, p. 8.)

### **Previous Research on Rapport**

Granitz, Koernig, and Harich, (2009) provide an excellent summary of the outcomes of rapport from previous research presented in table 2. Before beginning the research they carried out a literature review. They explored both the outcomes (Table 2) and antecedents (Table 3) of rapport from past research across a variety of disciplines. Their results are summarized in Table 2 and Table 3, below.

Table 2	
<i>Outcomes of rapport from previous research</i>	
1. Task success	Education*
2. Higher motivation	Education
3. Increased comfort	
4. Customization	
5. Loyalty	
6. Increased quality	Education
7. Satisfaction	Education
8. Higher Evaluations	Education
9. Word-of-mouth	
10. Better relationship	
11. Enhanced communication	
12. Trust	
*examples provided were from an Educational context	
<i>Granitz et al., pp. 54-55</i>	

Table 3	
<i>Antecedent of rapport from previous research</i>	
<b>Approach</b>	
	Approachability
	Mutual openness
	Trust
	Accessibility
<b>Personality Factors</b>	
	Caring
	Positive
	Empathy
<b>Homophily</b>	
	Status homophily
	Value homophily
<i>Granitz et al., pp. 53-54</i>	

Murphy and Rodriguez-Manzanares (2012) also provide an excellent summary of the indicators of rapport from the literature, presented in table 4.

Table 4	
<i>Summary of the indicators of rapport from the literature</i>	
<p><i>Disclosure, honesty and respect</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Being open, honest and transparent</li> <li>• Showing students one's human side</li> <li>• Admitting faults and mistakes</li> <li>• Talking freely</li> <li>• Engaging in self-disclosure</li> <li>• Thanking, apologizing</li> <li>• Sharing personal information</li> <li>• Creating trust through fulfillment of contracts and promises</li> <li>• Not psychologically threatening students by talking down to them</li> <li>• Showing consistent and predictable behaviours</li> </ul>	<p><i>Supporting and monitoring</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Showing care for and monitoring students' progress</li> <li>• Tailoring learning to students' needs</li> <li>• Providing guidance, feedback, support, help</li> <li>• Giving praise for good work</li> <li>• Giving help patiently and constructively</li> <li>• Dealing with lack of progress in a concerned manner</li> <li>• Showing patience with students</li> <li>• Exerting and expecting effort from students</li> <li>• Listening and paying attention</li> <li>• Showing interest in student success</li> <li>• Helping and encouraging them to succeed</li> <li>• Creating a positive, friendly, cooperative environment</li> </ul>
<p><i>Recognizing the person/individual</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Understanding the student as a person</li> <li>• Recognizing differences</li> <li>• Avoiding favoritism</li> <li>• Reporting on or requesting personal information, ideas, opinions and emotions</li> <li>• Engaging in personal discussions</li> <li>• Keeping track of students' photos and information related to their preferences and extra-curricular activities</li> <li>• Making personal contacts</li> </ul>	<p><i>Sharing, mirroring, mimicking, matching</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Being "on the same wave length"</li> <li>• Adopting each other's perspective</li> <li>• Behavioural and postural sharing, mirroring and mimicry</li> <li>• Writing a response in the same style</li> <li>• Matching body language, gestures, voice tempo and volume</li> <li>• Smiling and head nodding</li> <li>• Sharing values, attitudes, social style, beliefs</li> </ul>
<p><i>Interacting socially</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Engaging in social conversation</li> <li>• Engaging in non-course related, off-task chat</li> <li>• Getting to know students socially</li> <li>• Using humour</li> </ul>	<p><i>Availability, accessibility, and responsiveness</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Being available to answer questions</li> <li>• Being accessible</li> <li>• Being responsive</li> <li>• Providing constant and immediate feedback</li> </ul>
<p><i>Caring and bonding</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Being caring</li> <li>• Bonding</li> </ul>	<p><i>Communicating effectively</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ensuring that communication is comfortable, easy/smooth</li> </ul>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Showing concern</li> <li>• Showing empathy and an understanding of students' needs</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Using technologies such as instant messaging with which students are comfortable</li> </ul>
<i>Murphy &amp; Rodriquez-Manzanares, pp. 172-173</i>	

Using a qualitative method, Granitz et al., (2009), surveyed 40 business faculty members from five public universities and four private universities. They emailed out the following open ended questions: a) what leads to good rapport with students and b) what are the outcomes of good rapport with students? They had a 100% response rate and the answers were very detailed (p. 55).

Granitz et al's., (2009) research results supports the findings of their literature review. Namely that across a variety of disciplines the antecedents of rapport remain consistent (p.53). This is important because it further supports the definition of rapport, taking rapport from nebulous statements such as "being on the same page" or "just clicking" to antecedents that can be learned and replicated. Results are summarized in Table 5 below.

Table 5					
<i>Antecedents and Outcomes of rapport</i>					
Antecedents: Faculty view of factors leading to good rapport between Faculty and Students			Outcomes: Faculty view of outcomes of rapport between faculty and students.		
Approach 77.5%			Student Benefits 72.5%		
	Respect	32.5%		Enhanced Learning	37.5%
	Approachability	30%		Greater effort and motivation	32.5%
	Communicate Openly	27.5%		Greater attention, involvement, and participation	30%
	Mutual Openness	12.5%		Increased comfort	17.5%
	Interest in Student Success	10%		Customized learning opportunities	10%
	Student Interest	10%		Faculty Benefits 40%	
	Expertise	7.5%		More fun	15%
	Trust	7.5%		Rewarding teaching	15%
	Keep it real	7.5%		Increased Faculty appreciation	12.5%
	Patience	7.5%		Higher Teaching Evaluations	7.5%
	Make an effort	5%		Positive Word of Mouth	5%
	Accessibility	5%	Benefits outside the classroom 30%		
Personality 52.5%				Lasting relationships	20%
	Caring	32.5%		Increased faculty attention	15%
	Positive	30%		Graduates value education	7.5%
	Empathy	10%	Faculty-Student Benefits 12.5%		
Homophily 10%				Enhanced communication	10%
	Shared ideas, values and goals	12.5%		Trust	7.5%
Granitz et al., pp.56-57.					

From Benson, Cohen, and Buskist (2005) we know which qualities undergraduate students at Auburn University report as being those that induce rapport. In a sample of 166 undergraduate students, in a face-to-face, introductory psychology course,

- 33% report experiencing rapport with 1% to 5% of their instructors
- 30% report experiencing rapport with 6% to 25% of their instructors
- 22% report experiencing rapport with 26% to 50% of their instructors, and
- 15% report experiencing rapport with greater than 50% of their instructors (pp. 237-238).

Further to this, they found that students who experienced rapport were more likely to engage in pro-academic behaviours such as attending class, paying attention, studying, enjoying the subject, enjoying the professor, making use of office hours, and email and a taking another class with the professor, or in the same subject (p. 238).

The 10 most frequently reported rapport-inducing teacher qualities, in order, involved the following:

1. encouraging,
2. open-mindedness,
3. creative,
4. interesting,
5. accessible,
6. happy,
7. having a “good” personality,
8. promoting class discussion,
9. approachability,
10. concern for students, and fairness

(Benson et al., 2005, p. 238)

Benson et al., (2005) study supports the argument that rapport is a key element in effective teaching. This element of effective teaching cannot be lost as we move to explore, and understand the impact that instructor’s behaviour has on student-instructor



rapport in undergraduate e-learning. Perhaps this research will provide the beginnings of a road map for instructors related to how to translate what we know about building rapport in a face-to-face setting to the e-learning environment.

So what do we have as a result of this exploration? We have the construct of rapport, with seven clearly labeled dimensions: understanding, encouraging, caring, fair, communicative, respectful, and approachable. We have a study that ties rapport to learning outcomes in an e-learning context. We have support for the importance and relevance of rapport in education, the outcomes of that rapport and insights into the qualities that students report induce rapport. We have curiosity that, a) there may be negative rapport and b) that rapport may develop in stages. What we do not know is instructor behaviours that contribute to the perception of rapport by students in an e-learning context. Example: *Does using chat to find out the likes and dislikes of students* (indicator) enhance rapport from the student perspective? Nor do we know what instructors perceive to be the behaviours that contribute to the development of rapport in an e-learning context. This last is recommended for further research.

## **Transaction Distance Theory**

According to W. Laurence Neuman, “Theory does many things: It clarifies thinking, extends understanding, deepens discussion, and enriches analysis” (Neuman, p. 56). Moore’s Theory of Transactional Distance provides a clear pedagogical concept related to the teacher-learner relationship that exists at a distance and it is this relationship and the perception of behaviours that are at the core of this research. While other models (Community of Inquiry Model) and concepts (Social Presence) provide additional insights into distance education, it is the parsimony of Moore’s Theory of Transactional Distance that resonates with this researcher.

It is the separation of learners and teachers that profoundly affects both teaching and learning. With separation there is a psychological and communications space to be crossed, a space of potential misunderstanding between the inputs of instructor and those of the learner. It is this psychological and communications space that is the transactional distance. (Moore, p. 22)

The whole point and purpose of distance education theory is to summarize the different relationships and strength of relationship among and between these variables that make up transactional distance, especially the behaviours of teachers and learners. (Moore, p. 23)

The research undertaken for this thesis was inspired by the quotes above. A desire to explore and understand the psychological development of rapport across the space of potential misunderstanding between the inputs of instructors and perceptions of

the learner. Further to that, to focus on and ask questions related to specific behaviours of instructors and the resulting perceptions on the part of undergraduate students.

Transactional distance is a continuous or relative variable rather than absolute (Moore, p.23). In my words, that means some students / teachers will be comfortable with more or less potential misunderstanding.

Moore provides us with three variables related to the development of the relationship between student and teacher. These variables are: Dialogue, Structure and Learner Autonomy (p. 23). If a variable is present and accounted for in the creation of a distance education programme, transactional distance will be reduced and possibly eliminated.

Dialogue is defined as: positive interactions that are purposeful, constructive and valued by each party, synergistic in nature and moving towards improved understanding by the student (Moore, p. 24).

Factors that influence occurrence of dialogue:

- Communication medium
- Number of students per teacher
- Frequency of opportunities for communication
- Physical environment of both the student and teacher
- Emotional environment of the teacher
- Emotional environment of the learner
- Teacher personality

- Learner personality
- Content

The second variable explored by Moore is that of structure which is defined as: elements of course design, the way in which the teaching is structured and delivered through various communication channels (Moore, p. 26). The importance of structure can be found in its ability to be responsive to the individual needs of learners.

There are a number of factors that influence structure including:

- Communication media being used
- Philosophy of the teacher
- Emotional characteristics of the teacher
- Personality of the learner
- Other characteristics of the learner
- Constraints imposed by educational institution (Moore, p. 26)

As we think back to 1989, the year this article is first published, what are some of the changes that you have experienced personally as they relate to the factors influencing structure? For myself, I acknowledge that email, chat, making and sharing videos, the use of Skype, and the creation of interactive documents and websites are changes with the media. As a trainer my own philosophy of education has expanded to include an ability of the learner to learn without my help. Emotionally, adult learners and educators are far more confident with technology and able to perceive personality or if you prefer

learning needs via text-based interactions versus face to face. Overall there is an awareness and openness to education being provided at a distance that simply was not present many years ago. As a distance education student, I have become much more aware of and adept at Moore's third variable: learner autonomy. "Learner autonomy is the extent to which in the teaching/learning relationship it the learner rather than the teacher who determines the goals, the learning experiences and the evaluation decisions of the learning programme" (Moore, p. 31). "In highly distant programmes therefore, learners have to take responsibility for making judgments and taking decisions about study strategies....Thus the greater the transactional distance, the more such autonomy the learner will exercise" (Moore, p. 27).

The autonomy of the learner is an important feature of transactional distance. It places emphasis on, and transfers responsibility for learning from the instructor to the student. The instructor then becomes not only a subject matter expert, but a guide into how a student can best become a self-directed learner. "While only a minority of adults might be practicing as fully autonomous learners, the obligation on teachers is to assist them to acquire these skills" (Moore, p. 32). The role of the instructor, then, expands to encompass the development of self-directed learning skills of the adults they teach.

To overcome transactional distance in these ways by appropriate structuring of instruction and appropriate use of dialogue is very demanding. It requires the engagement of many different skills and it requires that these skills are systematically organized and deployed. It requires changes in the traditional role

of teachers and provide the basis for selecting media for instruction (Moore, p. 28).

It is hoped that this research will help to provide guidance related to the skills that are need to overcome transactional distance in a distance education setting.

Computer mediated communication (CMC) provides opportunity for faster dialogue and individual dialogue with instructors and between learners (Moore, p. 32). Moore states: “Not only can each individual student interact with the ideas of others, but this can be in his/her own time and his/her own pace.” (p. 33)

In summary the development of rapport has moved from a nebulous concept to one that can be quantified and measured. Previous research into rapport shows that it plays an important role in educational outcomes. Transactional Distance Theory provides us with a clear concept related to the student-instructor relationship at a distance. Moore’s focus is the psychological and communications space that holds within it, the potential for misunderstanding between students and instructors. Moore also provides us with three variables, dialogue, structure and learner autonomy, of which dialogue most clearly encompasses rapport.

## **Chapter 3**

### **Method**

#### **Choice of Design**

My background is in the field, either in a training room or providing one-on-one coaching support to students. As a trainer my focus has been on providing learners with practical solutions to situations they encounter in the work place. In considering a thesis and the research options, it became apparent that the pragmatic nature of my training career would reflect in the choice of research design.

A mixed-method approach was selected as a way to both test and provide insights into the experience of rapport from the undergraduate students' perspective. The SIRS-9 provides an excellent tool to assess in qualitative terms how students rate nine variables of rapport, and the follow-up questions would provide the voice of the student as we probe for understanding of what instructor behaviours support or diminish rapport in an on-line environment, the practical application of this research being a possible guide or road map for online instructors to enhance rapport with their online students.

#### **Participants**

These students were at different points in their studies, with the common element of all being virtual, online only students. The following demographic information was obtained from the website of Athabasca University. Unfortunately I was not able to source comparative data. These are adult students, working and studying, from across the country and around the world.

### Student Demographics 2010-11:

- The average undergraduate is 29.4 years of age; the average graduate student, 38.2 years.
- 83% of students work while they study.
- 67% of undergraduate students are women.
- 31% of graduates support dependents.
- 70% of graduates are the first in their family to earn a university degree.
- 36% of undergraduates reside in Alberta, 36.4% in Ontario and the rest throughout Canada and the world. Students live in every Canadian province and territory and in 90 foreign countries.
- 34% of undergraduates are visiting students from other institutions.

Source: <http://www.athabascau.ca/aboutau/media/aufacts.php>

### Instrument Specifics

Fluid Survey was selected as the survey tool of choice as the data is maintained on Canadian Servers, subject to Canadian laws. Fluid Survey is a robust tool that allows for data export to a variety of formats including SPSS and Excel.

The survey itself was inspired by the original SIRS-9 used by Lammers and Gillaspay Jr. The original consisted of 9 questions relating to an individual instructor experience with a 5 point Likert type scale scoring system. The questions language was changed from specific to broad and a qualitative question added. (Example: Original: Your instructor understands you? Modified: Your instructors understand you?) Care was



taken to remain as true to the original instrument so as to maintain the integrity of the questions and probe the student experience. Below is an example of the changes made.

Original SIRS-9 (see appendix A)

Reflect on your personal interaction and observations in this class thus far. Evaluate these questions on a scale from one to five, one being “not at all” and 5 being “very much so”:

1. Your instructor understands you.
2. Your instructor encourages you.
3. Your instructor cares about you.
4. Your instructor treats you fairly.
5. Your instructor communicates effectively with you.
6. Your instructor respects you.
7. Your instructor has earned your respect.
8. Your instructor is approachable when you have questions or comments.
9. In general, you are satisfied with your relationship with your instructor.

(Lammers & Gillaspay Jr., p. 4)

Survey used for this research (see appendix B)

Note that the level 1 questions were scored on a Likert type scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being “not at all” and 5 being “very much so”. The second level, or follow up question allowed room for a text based response. Also note that the questions were based on student’s overall experiences of instructors and not a specific instructor.

Reflect upon your personal interaction and observation in your online courses thus far.

Do You Perceive that?

1. Your instructors understand you. (Likert type scale)
  - a. What have your instructors done to demonstrate this understanding to you? (text answer)
2. Your instructors encourage you.

- a. What have your instructors done to demonstrate their encouragement?
3. Your instructors care about you.
  - a. What have your instructors done to demonstrate that they care about you?
4. Your instructors treat you fairly.
  - a. What have your instructors done to demonstrate that they treat you fairly?
5. Your instructors communicates effectively with you.
  - a. What have your instructors done to demonstrate effective communication?
6. Your instructors respect you.
  - a. What have your instructors done to demonstrate that they respect you?
7. Your instructors have earned your respect.
  - a. What have your instructors done to earn your respect?
8. Your instructors are approachable when you have questions or comments.
  - a. What have your instructors done to demonstrate that they are approachable?
9. In general, you are satisfied with your relationships with your instructors.
  - a. What have your instructors done to make you satisfied with your instructor-student relationships?

## **Ethics**

Ethical issues were considered throughout the design, and implementation of this research, and in the documentation of these results. Of highest concern was the mitigation of any negative implications on research participants. In order to mitigate the possibility of embarrassment, loss of privacy, or some other kind of harm, efforts were taken to ensure informed consent, privacy, and confidentiality.

Informed consent was necessary before being admitted to the online survey. If informed consent was not provided, the participant was jumped out of the survey to a “thank you for participating page”. This means that no data was collected without informed consent.

Privacy and confidentiality were protected throughout this study. The only time a student was asked to provide any identifying information was in response to the question,

“Would you like to know the results of this survey?” In that case, the respondent was able to leave an email address. These email addresses were separated out from the survey results and only I had access to that information. Once removed from the responses I had no way to go back and match responses to a particular email address.

To avoid possible bias, respondents could not be identified. At no point was any program of study type question, or current instructor type question asked. There is no way for me to trace back information to a particular instructor (s), unless the respondent voluntarily named them in a response. Even with that information, I removed any such identifiers from the results.

In keeping with confidentiality and privacy requirements, there was no way for the instructors who sent the invitation to complete the survey to their students, to know which students participated.

Research Ethics Board (REB) approval was secured on July 2, 2014 (File #21470) and Institutional Permission secured on July 22, 2014. All correspondence has been approved as part of Institutional Permission. (See appendixes C, D and E).

## **Validity**

There is content validity between our definition of rapport and the use of the SIRS-9 tool to measure its presence (or absence). According to Neumann, content validity addresses the question: Is the full content of a definition represented in a measure? (p. 212). Again, the definition being used for this research is as follows: “Positive rapport, from the perspective of the student, exists when the student believes

that his/her instructor is understanding, encouraging, caring, fair, communicative, respectful, and approachable” (Dr. Bill Lammers, personal communication, February 20, 2014). The SIRS-9 uses a Likert type scale to measure nine variables, seven of which are in explicitly stated in the definition of rapport for this research.

In the qualitative portion of the research, I remained true to the core principle of validity, which, according to Neumann, was to create a tight fit between understandings, ideas, and statements about the social world and what is actually occurring (p. 214). Through the iterative coding process and the selection of statements used further along in the findings, the research strove to share the authentic, lived experiences of students in online undergraduate education.

### **Data Collection**

The initial request for participation was sent to 16 undergraduate program directors. With the support of undergraduate Faculty from three different department’s invitations to participate in an online survey were sent to approximately 980 virtual undergraduate students. Undergraduates were selected as the convenience sample in order to better understand their student experience. (See appendix F and G).

Given the various demands being placed on their time and attention, the survey had one posting in the virtual classroom and one reminder notification. (The initial invitation to participate was accompanied by a URL link to the web-based survey and a follow up after 10 days posted in the virtual classroom.) The survey was open for three weeks, allowing students’ time to participate. It is interesting to note that the largest number of responses happened just after the survey opened and again just after the

reminder notice was posted. The remainder came in sporadically while the survey was open.

The response rate was 8.9% or 87 surveys. This was reduced to 7.6% or 77 surveys when the data was filtered by *undergraduate student*. The data analysis was done using these responses. The 77 survey responses were a convenience sample.

### **Data Analysis**

Once the survey closed the data was analyzed in the order it was presented on the survey. All data was filtered by 'yes' for undergraduate student.

The quantitative data was graphed using the count method of the Likert type scale and graphed accordingly. The qualitative data went through two separate coding procedures for quality control. Using the first variable as an example, here is the process as it was used.

The first qualitative question asked was "What have your instructors done to demonstrate this understanding to you?" and respondents were provided with a text box in which to answer. The word count/word cloud feature was applied to the answer to the above question and the top 11 codes were saved in a separate file within the Fluid Survey program. I, while working with the data, decided to use the top 11 codes as the cut off based on the fact that going higher, to say 15 codes, provided too fine a level of detail and going lower, to say 7 codes, was not detailed enough.

The raw data, or answers to the above question were then printed out and manually coded by the researcher, using an iterative process of establishing and refining

the codes. Continuing with our example, there were 74 written responses to the question, What have your instructors done to demonstrate this understanding to you?

Within those 74 written responses, the term ‘feedback’ which was used 22 times with an addition 4 respondents using the word ‘comments’ to describe feedback. Again, using the iterative process, further refinement of the ‘feedback’ was necessary as the respondents had provided a number of adjectives to describe the nature of the feedback. The list of adjectives include: effective, quickly, valid, good, extensive, constructive, useful, lots of, detailed, very good, which this researcher coded as *constructive feedback*.

While there was thought given to coding this as ‘dialogue’ as per Moore’s definition, the purpose of this research was to explore specific behaviours that instructors have done and that have been perceived/experienced as understanding by the undergraduate student. The process outline above was used for each of the nine variables in the survey.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Findings**

In an effort to gauge the e-learning experience of the survey respondents the following question was asked: How many online courses have you completed to-date?

Using the full sample of 77 responses to the above question, the results are as follows: mean = 9.78, median = 6, mode = 4 with a standard deviation of 10.76. In reviewing the 77 responses there were several low and high so the sample was modified by removing responses for 0 and more than 30 completed classes. This brought the sample size down to 65 responses and the following results: mean = 8.49, median = 6, mode = 4 and a standard deviation of 6.74. This shows that our respondents represent a wide range of experience when it comes to completing undergraduate e-learning.

This research has at its core two questions the first of which is: Do undergraduate students perceive rapport with instructors in online undergraduate e-learning? Table 6 summarizes the results of Likert type scale responses. The results support a conclusion that undergraduate students do perceive rapport with their instructors in an e-learning environment. The responses reflect an experience on each of the 9 variables, with variables 3, 6 and 7 scoring at the 3 level and the remainder at the 4 level. This quantitative data is further supported by the voices of the students themselves. We will probe these further in response to our second research question.

Table 6						
Summary of Rapport Indicators, Likert type scale						
Variable	Question	Likert scale (1 low – 5 high) Responses (mean)				
		5	4	3	2	1
1	Your instructors understand you?	10%	40%	28%	14%	6%
2	Your instructors encourage you?	8%	36%	31%	10%	14%
3	Your instructors care about you?	6%	20%	36%	22%	16%
4	Your instructors treat you fairly?	31%	34%	27%	6%	1%
5	Your instructors communicate effectively with you?	19%	32%	27%	12%	9%
6	Your instructors respect you?	22%	32%	36%	8%	1%
7	Your instructors have earned your respect?	19%	32%	38%	8%	3%
8	Your instructors are approachable when you have questions or comments?	30%	32%	26%	10%	1%
9	In general, you are satisfied with your relationship with your instructors?	22%	31%	27%	16%	4%

The answer to our second research question comes from the qualitative data collected in the survey. In asking qualitative questions we wanted to know the answer to our second research question: If students do perceive rapport in an online setting, what instructor behaviors enhance student-instructor rapport in undergraduate e-learning? An exploration of each variable follows.

### **First variable: Understand You**

Survey response (2014):

There is a range of understanding. With some I feel I have connected and others don't seem to be paying much attention. This is exhibited in the quality of their



comments on my work (do the comments really reflect what I said, or does it sound like a packaged comment) and whether/how they respond to e-mail questions.

On a 1 to 5 Likert Scale, 40.3% of students reported at the 4 level, indicating a high level of being understood by their instructors. From the qualitative data, below are the behaviours that demonstrated to students that the instructor/tutor understands them.

1. Constructive feedback (26%),
2. Answered questions (21%),
3. Instructor/tutor initiated contact (12%),
4. Asked questions (8%),
5. Quick to respond (7%)
6. Help/helped (4%)

A common element among these behaviours is that it is *responsive* to the student and that instructors treat them as an *individual* versus a pre-packaged comment or reply.

### **Second Variable: Encourage You**

Survey response (2014):

I have had exceptional instructors who have really engaged me in course material – follow up to see how you are progressing, check-in, proactively inform you of extended absences. Others are middle of the road – don't really make an effort one way or the other. I felt one instructor was particularly harsh and reserved in emails.

On the 1 to 5 Likert type scale 36% of students responded at the 4 level indicating that they do experience encouragement from their instructors and tutors. From the qualitative data the following were reported as behaviours through which students experienced that encouragement.

1. Positive feedback (40%)
2. Contacted me (9%)
3. Email/follow up check in (8%)
4. Additional resources specific to the student (7%)
5. Phone calls (5%)
6. Responding (3%)

What are the common elements of these behaviours? In our first variable students reported constructive feedback that leads to being understood. In this second variable it is the *tone* of the feedback that sets it apart for the student. It is positive and individualized.

Survey response (2014): “Positive feedback as well as encouraging remarks on assignments. Several instructors have stood out more positively than others, making me feel that they are rooting for me, and are honestly glad when I succeed.”

### **Third Variable: Care about you**

The third variable related to the experience of rapport is the first one to score at 3 level (35.5%) on the Likert Scale. From this we can infer that caring about the student may be a difficult experience to convey.

Survey response (2014): “I think this is a difficult question to answer whether my instructors actually care about me since all of our interaction has been virtual. However, their communication appears that they want me to be successful in my educational career.”

From the qualitative feedback students reported that the following behaviours demonstrated that instructors care about them.

1. Help/helped/ helpful (23%)
2. Thorough feedback (16%)
3. Instructor initiated communication (13%)
4. Email (7%)
5. Phone (6%)

Again, what are the commonalities of these behaviours? What instructor behaviours better demonstrate and allow students to experience the variable about caring? From the data, help/helped and helpful (23%) is in response to a student's request for assistance and it is the manner in which the instructor/tutor responded that allows students to experience caring. When someone helps us, they are responding to our needs and then providing a road map to solve a problem. In education we work not to provide the answers, rather to guide students to their own answers. Sometimes however the barriers to learning, such as a looming deadline for an assignment, can only be alleviated by permission from an instructor for an extension. Knowing that a student can do better on an assignment, and allowing

them to resubmit demonstrates that the instructor is aware of the student's potential and wants to support that student in achieving their goals.

Survey response (2014):

Most of my instructors care about my success because they provide me with help through telephone calls and email responses. They extend deadlines and provide valuable feedback and the ability to resubmit assignments to get a better mark. This has only been a handful of instructors though.

#### **Fourth variable: Treat you fairly**

Survey response (2014): "Yes, I believe that distance education is strongly based on this fact. Simply because there are no external factors that can influence decisions."

Being treated fairly scored at the 4 level (34%), followed closely by 5 (31%) on the Likert Scale. Grade, grades, marks and marking (28%) was behaviour that demonstrates this fairness to students, followed by feedback for improvement (16%). Based on the data, being treated fairly is well demonstrated to students' through grades and feedback for improvement. Students did reference that they had no way of knowing how instructors and tutors treat other students, and that they had no reason to think that they were not being treated fairly.

Survey response (2014): "They lay out their expectations about the course from day one. They help the learning process by offering feedback on assignments."

**Fifth Variable: Communicate effectively with you**

Survey response (2014): “Respond to emails without much delay – Provide feedback for assignments without much delay – Communicating if they are away or are behind in marking so you are aware that a response may be delayed – Answering questions in an appropriate timeframe.”

Survey response (2014): “Effective communication in this context is clear, concise – remembers past interactions and offers insights and direction when required.”

Communicate effectively with you, the fifth variable related to the development of rapport in distance education scored at the 4 level (33%) on the Likert scale. Through the coding of the qualitative data email came out on top as the medium for the communication, while speed (quick, prompt, timely), and tone (good, appropriate, clear, concise), came out as the behaviours that demonstrated effective communication to students.

1. Email (21%)
2. Speed – quick / prompt / timely (16%)
3. Feedback – good / appropriate (12%)
4. Clear (12%)
5. Phone (6%)
6. Help (6%)
7. Concise (5%)

While this research is striving to explore those variables that enhance rapport, I would be remiss if I did not mention that slow or non-existent answers to emails were recorded as very frustrating to students. Survey comments like:

- “the majority wouldn’t communicate at all”,
- “my instructor seemed annoyed with me”,
- “I don’t find the tutors particularly communicative”,
- “respond back eventually”,

were indicators of room for improvement in this area.

Survey response (2014):

Online instructors should be required to complete training related to email communication – it is easy to shut down a student with what is perceived to be a poor tone or disinterest. Further, emails to students should be monitored and evaluated to assess performance – communication with students is extremely critical with online studies.

### **Sixth variable: Respect you**

Survey response (2014): Effective communication (responding to e-mails without much delay, communicating delays or issues) – Treating you fairly – Providing positive but constructive feedback – Answering questions honestly – providing help and guidance when needed/requested – Treating you as an adult but also as a student.

Like the third variable of *care about you* our sixth variable *respect you*, scored at the 3 level (36%) on the Likert scale. Is this then another variable that is hard to demonstrate? According to the qualitative data the following are instructor behaviours that demonstrate respect to students.

1. Tone – respectful/professional/polite (31%)
2. Have not felt disrespected (17%)
3. Value you my work / education / experience (10%)
4. Speed – quick / timely (8%)
5. Answering questions (8%)
6. Providing feedback (7%)

Tone then is clearly a factor in the demonstration of respect to students. Of interest and worth exploring is the coding *have not felt disrespected* at 17%. This 17% presents an opportunity for instructors and tutors to engage, improve, enhance their behaviours (tone and value in particular) and develop rapport in the on line environment. At present 17% are reporting a neutral experience leaving the door open to enhancing the experience of rapport for undergraduate students. It may not be that *respect you* is hard to demonstrate, rather that there has been no indicator of what behaviours will enhance it.

Survey response (2014):

Instructors can demonstrate respect by quickly responding to emails and marking assignments and exams in a timely manner. My last instructor was exemplary – he exceeded all of my expectations – took the time to follow-up, personalized

email responses and conveyed genuine interest in my progress and success. My worst experience involved receiving form-type email responses.

### **Seventh variable: Earned your respect**

Survey response (2014):

Yes I would say that all but one instructor has. Respect has been earned by providing constructive feedback, responding to my inquiries, returning assignments within their agreed timelines, and providing insightful extra support that is above and beyond my inquiry (i.e. once I was struggling to understand a math problem, and the instructor not only explained it clearly, step by step, but also provided an alternative example to help me understand. I did not ask for the extra help, they offered on their own and I really appreciated that help.)

Earned your respect scored at the 3 level (38%) on the Likert Scale. The behaviours that students reported on are as follows:

1. Responsive / responsiveness (34%)
2. Feedback (quick, fair, valued) (21%)
3. Knowledge / Knowledgeable (11%)
4. Respected me (10%)
5. Professor (6%)
6. Fair in marking (4%)
7. Professional (3%)



In analyzing these results it became clear that there is a quid pro quo in the instructor-student relationship. Some students report respecting their instructors because of their knowledge (11%) and position (professor, 6%) the majority of respect is earned through the instructors *responsive* behaviours. To be clear, responsive behaviours are those where an instructor or tutor, responds well to an influence, in this case the student. This responsiveness was characterized in survey responses as follows:

- detailed responses,
- consistency,
- clarification,
- encouragement,
- challenging,
- providing insights,
- coaching to do better,
- over and above their obligations to me,
- extending deadlines and extra support.

Survey response (2014): “My instructors have helped me understand new material and have demonstrated that they are educated and intelligent people.”

#### **Eighth Variable: Approachable**

Survey response (2014):

Yes, as indicated above, all but one has been approachable. What makes them approachable in my opinion is their responsiveness to my questions, and the feedback they provide. The one instructor who was not approachable didn't respond to half of my questions, and the responses were basic / no depth.

For the eighth variable, approachable, scored at the 4 level (33%) with the five level a close second at 30%. There were three very clear behaviours that instructors engage in that demonstrate this approachability:

1. Respond (quick, prompt, and fully) (28%)
2. Availability / office hours (13%)
3. Tone / demeanor (7%)

Students showed a distinct preference to email (17%) to phone (7%) as the communication medium of choice. With 13% reporting a negative experience in this area, there is room for improvement with the development of rapport with online undergraduate students. These negative experiences are reflected in survey comments such as:

- “tutors who took longer than 5 – 7 business days to respond...caused more frustration than they could imagine”,
- “one has been curt, and one completely disrespectful in marking my work / communicating / accusing”,
- “some have been offended that I've contacted them via phone & have rarely been available during published hours”.

These behaviours have an impact on students seeking help again.

Survey response (2014):

Most instructors give quick email responses with detailed answers. On a couple of occasions I've had instructors give answers that imply I was trying to get them to do my work (asking for help with picking a research topic) or that I was unintelligent and those made me unlikely to seek help again.

### **Ninth variable: Satisfied with your relationship**

Survey response (2014): "When they are honest, resourceful, respectful, answer e-mails, and provide the necessary resources or guidance when necessary."

Satisfied with your relationship scored at the 4 level (31%) on the Likert scale.

The behaviours that support this experience are as follows:

1. Communication – high quality (34%)
2. Answered questions (19%)
3. Independent / self-directed (15%)
4. Positive (10%)
5. Graded assignments fairly (5%)

Within the code of *communication – high quality* are such descriptors as:

- "I feel like the only student",
- "personalized messages and follow up on my progress",
- "availability",

- “helped my learning goals”,
- “constructive comments”.

It is also of interest that students self-report being independent or self-directed students (15%) and enjoy the ability to reach out to an instructor if needed. In those cases students report reaching out, getting concise feedback and being able to get on with their studies.

The research results are summarized in Table 7 below.

Table 7

*Summary of research results*

Rapport Variable	Likert type scale score	Demonstrated by (reported at $\geq 10\%$ )
Understand you	4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Constructive feedback</li> <li>✓ Answered questions</li> <li>✓ Instructor / tutor initiated contact</li> </ul>
Encourage you	4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Positive feedback</li> </ul>
Care about you	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Help / helped / helpful</li> <li>✓ Thorough feedback</li> <li>✓ Instructor initiated communication</li> </ul>
Treat you fairly	4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Grade / Grades / Mark / Marks</li> <li>✓ Feedback for improvement</li> </ul>
Communicate effectively with you	4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Email</li> <li>✓ Speed – quick, prompt, timely</li> <li>✓ Feedback – good / appropriate</li> <li>✓ Clear</li> </ul>
Respect you	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Tone – respectful / professional / polite</li> <li>✓ Have not felt disrespected</li> <li>✓ Value my work / education and experience</li> </ul>
Earned your respect	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Responsive / Responsiveness</li> <li>✓ Feedback – quick, fair, valued</li> <li>✓ Knowledge / knowledgeable</li> </ul>
Approachable	4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Respond (quick, prompt, fully)</li> <li>✓ Email</li> <li>✓ Availability / office hours</li> </ul>
Satisfied with your relationship	4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Communication – high quality</li> <li>✓ Answered questions</li> <li>✓ Independent / Self-directed</li> <li>✓ Positive</li> </ul>

## **Chapter 5**

### **Conclusions**

This research began with a sincere curiosity related to the development of rapport in an e-learning environment. As with any idea, it began to germinate, fueled by discussions, research, reflection and critical thinking. Why rapport? In talking to students who had been part of an e-learning situation, whether it was a training module, or a college or university program, these antidotal reports include statements, like “they did not feel connected to the instructor”. These antidotal statements, got me thinking about the relationship between students and instructors, and the space that needed to be covered. Moore’s Theory of Transactional Distance provided the theoretical backdrop for this research.

The whole point and purpose of distance education theory is to summarize the different relationships and strength of relationship among and between these variables that make up transactional distance, especially the behaviours of teachers and learners. (Moore, p. 23)

In this quote Moore references the strength of the relationship and the behaviours of teachers and learners. While other variables such as motivation, community or engagement could have been explored, it was the issue of rapport between students and instructors that struck me as fundamental to the learning process. Research by Granitz, Korenigh and Harich (2009), as summarized in Table 2, page 14, clearly shows that the outcomes of rapport in an educational setting include: task success, higher motivation, increased quality, satisfaction and higher evaluations. This prompted the questions of

*can rapport be experienced at a distance? If so, what instructor behaviours enhance student-instructor rapport in an e-learning setting?*

While the dictionary definition of rapport: *A close and harmonious relationship in which the people or groups concerned understand each other's feelings or ideas and communicate well.* (Oxforddictionaries.com) provides us the emotive aspect of the experience of rapport, it continues to keep rapport in that nebulous realm of personal experience versus variables that can be defined and measured. The use of the SIRS-9 scale provided us with nine variables, related to the development of rapport in an online setting, they are: *understand you, encourage you, care about you, treat you fairly, communicate effectively with you, respect you and have they earned your respect* (Lammers & Gillaspay, Jr., 2013). Modifying the scale to include qualitative questions allowed students to express themselves, and provide insights into the various behaviours that instructors engaged in.

So what conclusions can we draw from this research? Given the scores on the Likert type scale the undergraduate students who participated in this research *do* experience rapport in the online educational setting. While separated by time and geography from their instructors, instructor behaviours are able to be perceived as rapport building by students. Overall, students experienced these elements of rapport building. Overall students indicated a satisfaction with their instructors.

Based on the research, the following are recommendations for those instructors and tutors who would like to further develop their rapport building skills in an online educational environment.

- To demonstrate understanding to your students, provide *constructive* feedback.
- To encourage your students, provide them with *positive* feedback.
- To demonstrate that you care, be *helpful* and when in doubt, reach out to students.
- To be fair, be *transparent* in your grading and provide feedback for improvement.
- To demonstrate communication, *respond* to students (email) quickly and clearly.
- To demonstrate respect, be *professional*, respectful and polite, value the student's experience.
- To earn respect, be *responsive* to the needs of the student and demonstrate your knowledge.
- To be approachable, *post and keep your office hours*, respond to inquiries, quickly, promptly and fully.
- To have students be satisfied with instructor student relationship, provide *high-quality communication*.

According to Lammers (2014), “For online courses, what is different is that certain modes of interaction that are technologically based become more prominent in the development of rapport” (B. Lammers, personal communication, February 20, 2014). This is reflected in the rating of email as the method of choice for communication with instructors. We might conclude that the development of solid email communication skills is a necessity for those instructors wanting to excel in rapport building with their online students. This would include such factors as tone, clarity, responsiveness and speed when responding to students.

Moore states that dialogue is defined as: positive interactions that are purposeful, constructive and valued by each party, synergistic in nature and moving towards improved understanding by the student (Moore, p. 24). The development of solid rapport building skills on the part of instructors would contribute to the enhancement of dialogue



as defined by Moore, therefore it has the potential to reduce transactional distance in an e-learning context.

### **Areas for further research**

Areas for further research related to rapport in e-learning could include a further refinement of the behaviours that enhance rapport and also clarification of those behaviours that diminish rapport. Also, what is the relationship between rapport and persistence behaviours? Can the development of an email communication training program for instructors influence the development of rapport with students? Does the development of rapport impact the experience for instructors? These are just a few areas for further consideration.

In conclusion, the ability to build and experience rapport is possible in an e-learning environment. Those qualities listed in the review of literature that make up an exemplary instructor are reflected here in the voices of students of online education. The research of Murphy and Rodríguez-Manzanares (2012) with high school distance education students is reflected here in the adult voices of undergraduate students in university. (Table 1, p. 5). In particular the categories of recognizing the person/individual, supporting and monitoring, availability, accessibility and responsiveness and tone of the interactions can be heard in the qualitative survey responses.

Now, with this research pointing a light on the fact that students in an e-learning environment also perceive rapport with their instructors, there is a need to enhance our awareness of this important component of the student – instructor relationship and find

ways to further enhance it. This research adds to the voices that say, rapport is not a nebulous concept such as “being on the same page” but is something that can be built, nurtured and enhanced.

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**Appendix A**

## Student Instructor Rapport Scale (SIRS-9)

**Reflect upon your personal interaction and observations in your class thus far.****Do You Perceive that:**

	<b>Not at all</b>		<b>Sometimes</b>		<b>Very much so</b>
Your instructor understands you	1	2	3	4	5
Your instructor encourages you	1	2	3	4	5
Your instructor cares about you	1	2	3	4	5
Your instructor treats you fairly	1	2	3	4	5
Your instructor communicates effectively with you	1	2	3	4	5
Your instructor respects you	1	2	3	4	5
Your instructor has earned your respect	1	2	3	4	5
Your instructor is approachable when you have questions or	1	2	3	4	5
In general, you are satisfied with your relationship with the instructor	1	2	3	4	5

(Lammers, 2012)

**Appendix B****Research Survey****Survey questions:**

How many online courses have you completed to-date?

Reflect upon your personal interaction and observation in your online courses thus far.

Do You Perceive that?

	<b>Not at all</b>		<b>Sometimes</b>		<b>Very much so</b>
Your instructors understand you	1	2	3	4	5
What have your instructors done to demonstrate this understanding to you?					
Your instructors encourage you	1	2	3	4	5
What have your instructors done to demonstrate their encouragement?					
Your instructors care about you	1	2	3	4	5
What have your instructors done to demonstrate that they care about you?					
Your instructors treat you fairly	1	2	3	4	5
What have your instructors done to demonstrate that they treat you fairly?					
Your instructors communicate effectively with you	1	2	3	4	5
What have your instructors done to demonstrate effective communication?					

Your instructors respect you	1	2	3	4	5
What have your instructors done to demonstrate that they respect you?					
Your instructors have earned your respect	1	2	3	4	5
What have your instructors done to earn your respect?					
Your instructors are approachable when you have questions or comments	1	2	3	4	5
What have your instructors done to demonstrate that they are approachable?					
In general, you are satisfied with your relationship with your instructors	1	2	3	4	5
What have your instructors done to make you satisfied with your instructor-student relationships?					

Would you like to know the results of this survey? If yes, please provide an email address where they can be sent to.

Thank you for your time and participation.



## **Appendix C**

### **Certification of Ethics**

July 02, 2014

Ms. Anne-Marie Rolfe

Faculty of Humanities & Social Sciences\Centre for Interdisciplinary Studies

Athabasca University

File No: 21470

Expiry Date: July 1, 2015

Dear Ms. Anne-Marie Rolfe,

Thank you for your recent resubmission to the Athabasca University Research Ethics Board (AUREB), addressing the clarifications and revisions as requested for your research entitled, 'Instructor behaviours that enhance student-instructor rapport in undergraduate e-learning'.

Your application has been Approved and this memorandum constitutes a Certification of Ethics Approval. You may begin the research immediately upon receipt of institutional permission to access AU staff. A request for AU Institutional Permission will be made on your behalf to the Vice President Academic. You will be notified once that permission has been granted.

Given the timing of your start, your recruitment of participants will be impacted by the new anti-spam legislation that came into force July 1, 2014 (i.e. instructors of courses will not be able to email students with the invitation to participate in your research, but may perhaps be able to post an invitation within their course). Please familiarize yourself with this legislation: CASL (<http://fightspam.gc.ca>) and discuss this with your supervisor.

This REB approval, dated July 2, 2014, is valid for one year less a day.

Throughout the duration of this REB approval, all requests for modifications, renewals and serious adverse event reports must be submitted via the Research Portal.

To continue your proposed research beyond July 1, 2015, you must submit a Renewal Form before June 15, 2015.

When your research is concluded, you must submit a Final Report Form to close out REB approval monitoring efforts.

At any time, you can login to the Research Portal to monitor the workflow status of your application.

If you encounter any issues when working in the Research Portal, please contact the system administrator at [research\\_portal@athabascau.ca](mailto:research_portal@athabascau.ca).

Sincerely,

Gail Leicht

Research Ethics Officer  
Research Ethics Board

## **Appendix D**

### Institutional Permission

#### MEMORANDUM

Office of the Vice President Academic

July 22, 2014

TO: Ms. Anne-Marie Rolfe

Faculty of Humanities & Social Sciences\Centre for Interdisciplinary Studies,  
Graduate Student

Athabasca University

COPY: Supervisor

Registrar, AU

Institutional Studies, AU

Office of the Vice President Academic

SUBJECT: Institutional Permission - REB File No. 21470

You have been approved to contact Athabasca University staff, students and systems for your research proposal 'Instructor behaviours that enhance student-instructor rapport in undergraduate e-learning' subject to the following conditions:

Your research proposal has been approved by the Athabasca University Research Ethics Board (AUREB);

Staff and student information is used solely for the purpose outlined in the research proposal submitted to the AUREB;

Secondary uses of data or subsequent research proposal(s) will require additional approval of the AUREB, permission of the staff or former staff, students or former students and institutional permission if the individual is still an Athabasca University staff or student;

Staff and student participants will be provided with information about how information will be represented in documentation, reports and publications;

Staff and student information will not be shared with a third party;

The nature of communication with staff and students is that outlined in the research proposal submitted to the AUREB;

Staff and students demographic information will be used solely within the research project;

Documentation such as staff and student responses to questionnaires, interview responses (written or taped), observations of individual staff or student behaviors, etc. will not be used for any purpose other than that outlined in the research proposal submitted to the AUREB;

Staff and student information will be kept confidential until it is destroyed after a period not in excess of 10 years;

Use of personal information will be in compliance with the Freedom of Information, Protection of Privacy (FOIP) legislation of the province of Alberta, Canada.

I wish you every success with your research project.

Dr. Cindy Ives

Acting Vice President Academic

**Appendix E**

## Informed Consent\*

Dear Participant.

My name is Anne-Marie Rolfe, living in Stratford, PEI, and over the past several years I have been studying via distance education just like you. Now, I've reached the research stage in my studies towards the completion of a Masters of Education, and I need your help.

The following information is provided for you to decide whether you wish to participate in the present study. You should be aware that you are free to decide not to participate or to withdraw at any time without affecting your relationship with Anne-Marie Rolfe, or Athabasca University.

The purpose of this study is to explore instructor behaviours that enhance (or diminish) student-instructor rapport in undergraduate e-learning. The procedure will be a mixed-method study. Both a survey and one-on-one follow-up interviews are being conducted. At this stage in the research, process will be generally defined as understanding your experiences of student-instructor rapport in undergraduate e-learning.

Data will be collected via a web-based survey and one-on-one interviews, for those who are willing. The web-based survey will take approximately 5 minutes to complete. For the one-on-one interviews, we will arrange a phone or Skype interview. The interviews will last about 10 to 15 minutes and will be recorded so that the data can then be transcribed and coded. Individuals involved in the data collection will be Anne-Marie Rolfe as the researcher, and undergraduate course coordinators, tutors or academic experts who have posted the invitation to the web-based survey to their current students.

Do not hesitate to ask any questions about the study either before participating or during the time that you are participating. I would be happy to share my findings with you after the research is completed. However, your name, course name, and course number will not be associated with the research findings in any way, and your identity as a participant will be known only to the researcher, only if you provide it for the follow-up interview.

There are no known risks and/or discomforts associated with this study. The expected benefits associated with your participation are a greater understanding of the student experience of rapport in undergraduate e-learning. The research findings are intended for submission to Dr. Pat Fahy, Supervisor for the completion of work towards my thesis.

By checking the appropriate box you are confirming that you have read the above and are providing informed consent.

This study has been reviewed by the Athabasca University Research Ethics Board. Should you have any comments or concerns regarding your treatment as a participant in this study, please contact the Office of Research Ethics at 1-800-788-9041, ext. 6718 or by e-mail to rebsec@athabascau.ca

Researcher: Anne-Marie Rolfe

amr@noodle-it.com

902-314-3738

Supervisor: Dr. Pat Fahy

patf@athabascau.ca

866-514-6234

\*please note: This will be added to the web based survey, that participants review before accessing the survey.

If you would like to find out more about FluidSurvey's privacy policy please go here:

<http://fluidsurveys.com/about/p2/>

## Appendix F

### Recruitment Letter (email) to Undergraduate Faculty

Hi,

Please allow me to introduce myself, my name is Anne-Marie Rolfe and I'm an M.Ed student here at Athabasca University. I am pursuing my thesis, under the supervision of Dr. Pat Fahy, and I am hoping that you will be willing to help in my research efforts.

My research focus is Instructor behaviours that enhance student-instructor rapport in undergraduate e-learning. For the purposes of this research rapport is defined as: "Positive rapport, from the perspective of the student, exists when the student believes that his/her instructor is understanding, encouraging, caring, fair, communicative, respectful, and approachable." Dr. Bill Lammers (2014)

In order to pursue this research project I need your help to post an invitation to participate in an online survey to your undergraduate students during the mid-point of the Fall 2014 semester.

The survey is designed to take less than five minutes to complete and includes an invitation to a follow up one on one interview for those students that are interested. The survey is NOT an evaluation of your rapport with students, rather an overview of the student's experience with rapport in e-learning to-date. Please see the survey questions below.

Your willingness to post the survey request to your students would mean a great deal to me as I work to complete my studies. If you are interested, I will send you a copy of the final research results.

If you are willing to participate, please reply to this email. Once the survey is open I will then send you the link to post for to your students.

Thank you in advance for your consideration.

Anne-Marie Rolfe

Athabasca University, Graduate Student

Note: sample of the survey and follow up questions was also sent.

**Appendix G**

## Message for Faculty to post to undergraduate students

Dear (Personalize):

Thank you for agreeing to post this request to participate to your undergraduate students.

Below I've drafted a message/post that you can use or modify to request the participation of your students in this research.

A few things to note:

- The survey opens on October 8<sup>th</sup>, 2014 and will close October 29<sup>th</sup>, 2014.
- Depending on response rates, I may request a reminder be reposted to your students; I will follow-up at about the 10 day mark.

I sincerely appreciate your support in this. If you have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Anne-Marie Rolfe

Athabasca University, Graduate Student

Phone: 902-314-3738 / Skype: Anne-Marie-Rolfe

**Draft post/message to students to be sent by Instructor (Letter of initial contact)**

Hello,

Research is an ongoing part of education. As such, a graduate student here at Athabasca University has requested your participation in a brief (5 minutes or less) survey on the topic of rapport in undergraduate e-learning. Please support a fellow student by clicking on the link below and filling in the survey.

[http://fluidsurveys.com/surveys/amr-xqH/rapport/?preview=1&lang=en&TEST\\_DATA](http://fluidsurveys.com/surveys/amr-xqH/rapport/?preview=1&lang=en&TEST_DATA)

(Replace with active URL when survey is deployed.)

If you have any questions, contact me, or her directly.

Thank you,

Insert Instructor's name here.