Common Ground

Final Report

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1) Introduction

The Common Ground project is small-scale qualitative study commissioned by King's Academy to find out if actively including rapport-building activities in taught sessions will prove valuable for both educators and students. The literature in this field suggests that good rapport can lead to improved student well-being, belonging and attainment and that it is of particular significance for disadvantaged or underserved students.

The project was initially inspired by the teenage students one author, Vernee Samuel, spoke to for her MA thesis, "How they see us: student perspectives on how race and social class impact school experience." She conducted semi-structured interviews with a diverse group of ten higher attaining students from four non-selective comprehensive schools in London. The participants said that, in their experience, students were treated differently by staff depending on their race, sex and social class; furthermore that teachers had differing expectations of behaviour and attainment based on these same characteristics. This quote came from Summer, a 16 year old girl of mixed White/Black Caribbean heritage.

> *"People who have parents who have a better education, live in better places, teachers straight away assume that they're better behaved, they're smart. It's not always the case obviously but I definitely think they get the benefit of the doubt and the teacher makes up a picture of them in their mind and that's it, it can't be changed."*

We know that in the UK attainment remains stubbornly stratified by race and class (Gov.uk, Ethnicity facts and figures, 2022) and that common solutions like unconscious bias training have been found to have little effect and even to backfire by further entrenching stereotypes (Atewologun et al., 2018).

However dispiriting this may sound, there was one silver lining in the study. Every teenage participant said they had at least one teacher who treated all students with the same level of

respect, regardless of race, sex, social class or attainment level. This is how 14 year old Zak (mixed Asian/White heritage) described his experience:

> *"They don't set different rules for different people. Even ages and higher set and middle set and that, they don't lower or higher expectations. They just keep the same expectation for everyone."*

In order to discover how educators achieved this, we began by looking at the academic literature and found certain common themes across studies from Psychology, Education, Communication, and Management Studies. By and large, students value teachers and educators who get to know them as individuals; discover what they have in common; make themselves available and thus build a rapport with them. Most hearteningly perhaps, we found support for the idea that disadvantaged students are likely to benefit the most from an increase in educator-student rapport (Gehlbach et al., 2016).

King's Academy set up the Common Ground project to understand how these ideas could be used to improve the university experience for all students in terms of their sense of belonging, well-being and ultimately attainment. Reports published by King's such as the KCL Access and Participation Plan (2020) regularly point to the persistent attainment gap between White and BME students, and the What Works team have focused on improving outcomes for other underserved groups such as care leavers, forced migrants and estranged students.

With the Common Ground project, we wanted to find out if educators perceived that actively building educator-student rapport was valuable for student well-being and attainment in general and for underserved students in particular. We were also interested in whether and why students themselves valued these activities.

At the King's Academy Learning & Teaching Conference in June 2021, we ran a presentation to gauge interest in the topic. We then held two open workshops for members of faculty to test out our hypothesis, crowdsource ideas and recruit participants. These events also helped us to plan and refine our methodology. Over the summer of 2021 we recruited eleven educators from across King's who agreed to allow us to observe a teaching session where they were using a rapport-building activity. We then interviewed the educators, sent a short survey to their students and interviewed a small sample of students.

2) Literature review

We examined research from a range of fields including Education, Psychology, Communication, and Management Studies. It is worth noting that much of the literature in this area comes from the USA where there is perhaps greater contact time between individual educators and their students than in the UK.

The Oxford Learner's Dictionary defines rapport as *"a friendly relationship in which people understand each other very well".* Academic research on rapport in a classroom setting is a relatively recent enterprise, but there is a broad consensus that the concept of rapport encompasses positive relationships that, enable effective communication (Worley et al.,2007),

create a sense of belonging and connectedness (Dwyer et al., 2004), and engender trust between educators and students (Burke-Smalley, 2018).

Rapport between students and teachers has been shown to lead to a range of positive student outcomes, including attitudes toward the teacher and course, student motivation, and perceived learning (Wilson & Ryan, 2013). Frisby and Martin (2010) described educator-student rapport as an *"important relational component of establishing an overall positive classroom environment or climate".* For educators concerned that a focus on rapport might distract from attainment goals, Burke-Smalley suggests that good rapport enables educators to be *"reasonably challenging to evoke higher learning yet maintain likeability*" (2018).

Behaviours that promote rapport include getting to know students, being approachable and enthusiastic while creating a respectful learning atmosphere, and maintaining frequent contact (Wilson & Ryan, 2012, Buskist, 2012). The use of 'icebreakers' and similar activities can be used to build rapport by fostering a warm learning environment, humanising the teacher, bringing humour into the classroom, helping to learn students' names and reinforcing content learning (Chlup & Collins, 2010).

There is promising evidence that positive rapport between educators and students can be of particular significance for disadvantaged students. The 'Birds of a Feather' study (Gehlbach et al, 2016) of schoolteachers and their ninth grade students is a rare example of a randomised field study of classroom relationships. Students in the treatment group were told about five similarities they shared with their teachers while their teachers received the same information for about half their students. After five weeks, both teachers and students in the treatment groups perceived greater similarity with teach other. Perhaps most significantly, when teachers knew they had something in common with their students, those students earned better grades. The researchers then compared the impact of these interventions on 'well served students' (in this case White and Asian) and 'underserved students' (primarily Black and Latino) and found that the improved relationships were not distributed equally, *"Exploratory analyses suggest that these effects are concentrated within relationships between teachers and their "underserved" students. This brief intervention appears to close the achievement gap at this school by over 60%."* (Gehlbach et al., 2016 p.1) This study seems to indicate that the very act of improving rapport with all students will have the greatest impact on underserved students.

Other educator practices associated with increased rapport include learning students' names (Worley et al., 2007); setting clear expectations and using humour (Webb and Barrett, 2014); getting to know students, maintaining frequent contact, and being approachable and enthusiastic while creating a respectful learning atmosphere (Wilson and Ryan, 2014).

Overall, the literature suggests that while rapport can be built or grown using rapport-building activities such as icebreakers (Chlup and Collins, 2010), it cannot be manufactured or commanded and may require educators to rethink their boundaries by, for example, opening up to students and sharing their experiences (Wilson and Ryan, 2012). During our year of working on this project, we have observed the topic of rapport becoming more prominent in British educational discourse with a recent WonkHe blog arguing that the connections we make with students could be as important as the pedagogies we adopt (Moss, 2022).

Before embarking on our classroom observations, we created a Venn Diagram (Figure 1) to bring together our understanding of the academic literature with the King's educators' feedback from our workshops. This diagram illustrates some of the different ways that educators and students can get to know each other. We envisaged the centre segment as the 'sweet spot' where a rapport-building activity would foster a warm learning environment while also delivering or reinforcing subject knowledge.

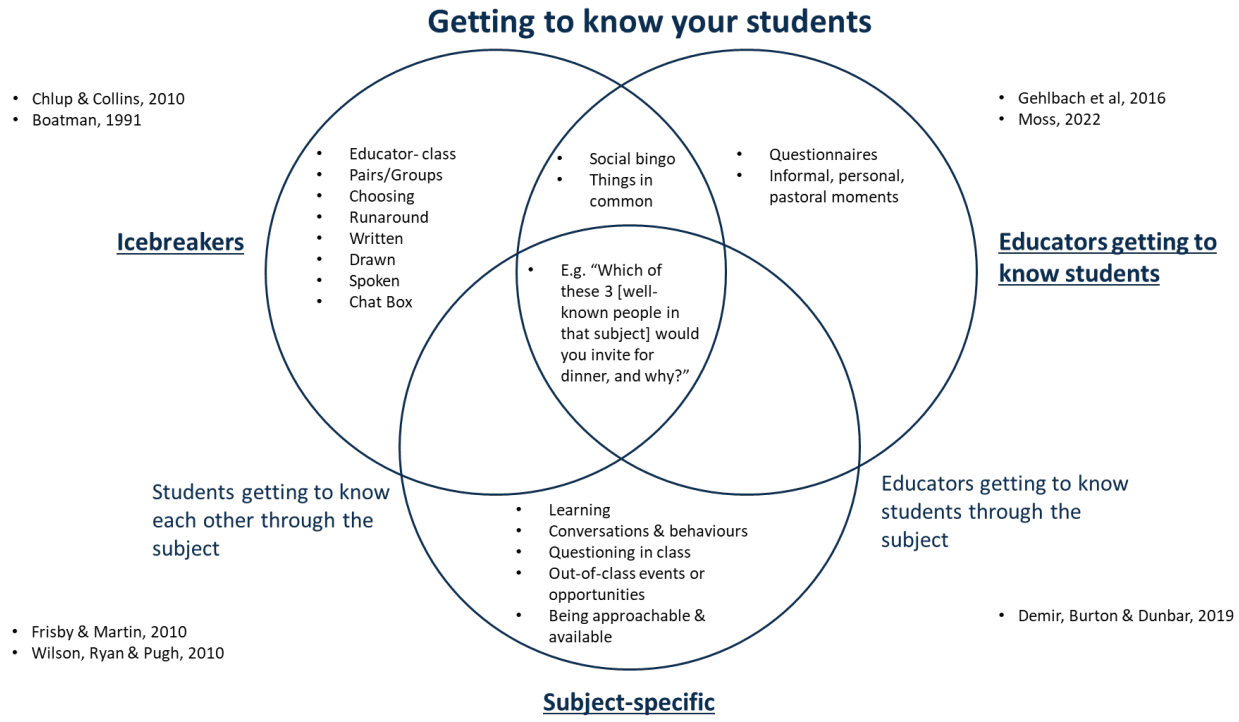

Figure 1 – Getting to know your students

3) Methodology

Our initial design was to source rapport-building activities from our King's colleagues; observe these activities in the classroom; and survey educators and students about their efficacy. In order get a sense of the scope of rapport-building activities taking place at King's we chose not to narrow down our participants to particular disciplines or specific teaching levels. However, as we were interested in educator-student relationships, we decided to focus on activities taking place during interactive sessions such as seminars, rather than more didactic ones such as lectures.

We recruited educator participants through our workshops and by word of mouth and eventually observed ten educators from a range of disciplines: Biochemistry, International Relations, Global Affairs, Modern Languages, Law, Medicine, and English for Academic Purposes (King's Foundations). Additionally, co-author Dr Vogel allowed VS to observe her conducting a rapport-building activity with a class of King's academics who were taking the Learning & Teaching Programme (LTP1), giving eleven observations in total.

The observations took place in the first semester of the 21/22 Academic year when many classes were still online because of coronavirus measures. Six of our observations took place online and five in person. Of the eleven original educator participants, ten accepted the offer to be interviewed about their practice. VS also interviewed a Head of Department who had led the

introduction of rapport-building measures as part of a Team Based Learning initiative across the undergraduate curriculum, giving us eleven interviews in total. We asked the nine educators who had been observed teaching students (excluding both the Head of Department and Dr Vogel who was teaching faculty) to send their students a short survey (Figure 2) using Microsoft Forms and received survey responses from at least one student from eight of those classes as shown in the table, Figure 3.

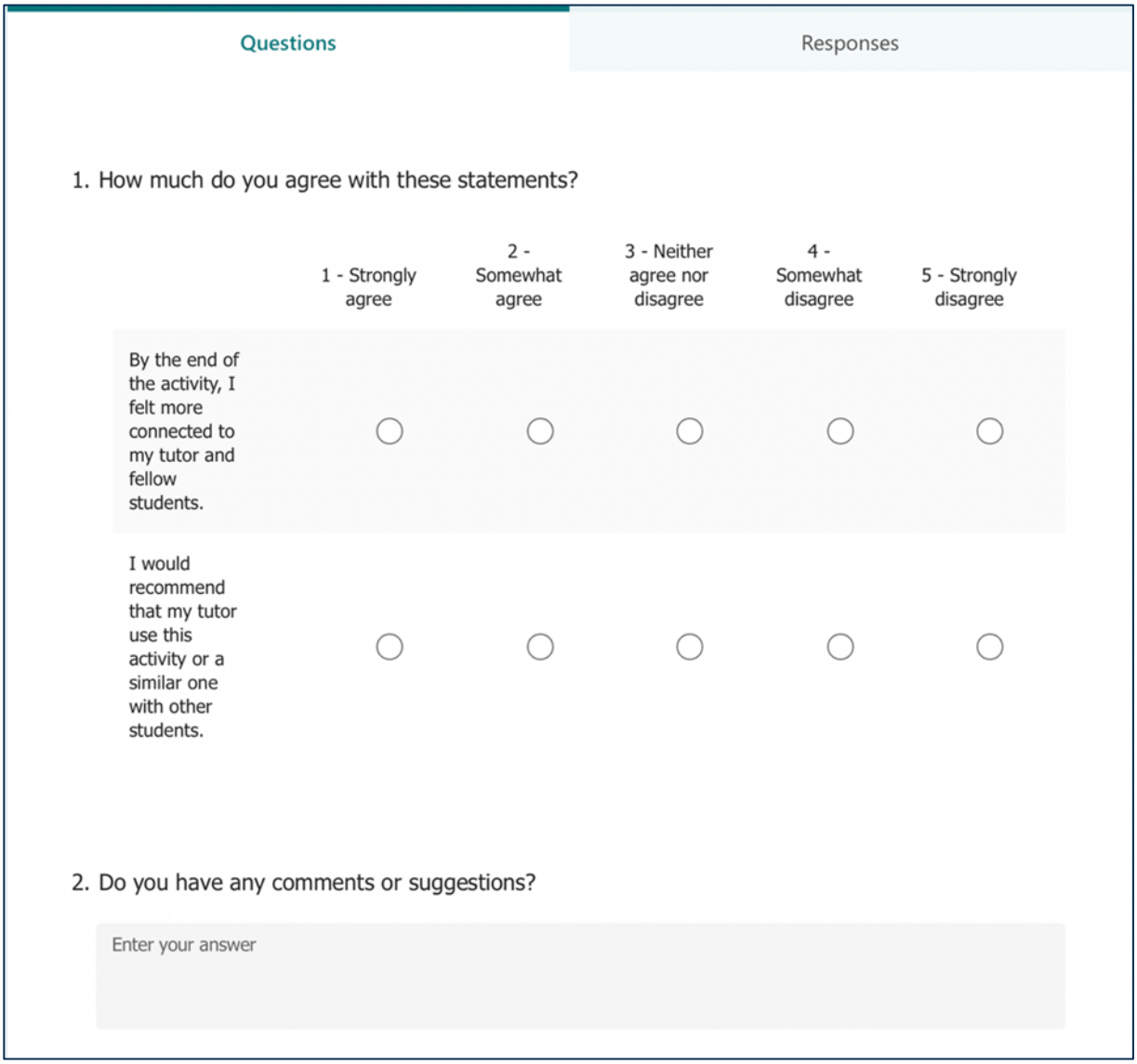

Figure 2 - Student Survey

While conducting the observations, VS made ethnographic notes in two broad categories. Firstly, she wrote down what educators were doing that could be described as antecedents of rapport based on examples from the literature and her own observations. This might include using students' names, making eye contact or giving pastoral support. Secondly, she noted what students were doing that could be seen as evidence of rapport such as making jokes, a change in body language or asking questions unprompted.

After each observation, VS arranged to conduct a 20-30 minute semi-structed interview with the educator. While there was an opportunity for the interview to cover different areas depending on the educator's chosen activity, the planned questions were:

1. Can you describe your activity?
2. What were you hoping to achieve?
3. How did you introduce and facilitate it?
4. How could you tell when things were going well?
5. Is there anything you would do differently next time?

VS then asked the educators to send out a short survey (Figure 2) to the students who had attended the observed class. The survey asked the students rate two statements on a 5 point scale ranging from Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree.

Statement 1 was, '*By the end of the activity, I felt more connected to my tutor and fellow students.'* Statement 2 was, *'I would recommend that my tutor use this activity or a similar one with other students.'* There was also a free text box for students to type comments or suggestions.

Due to limited resources we were unable to conduct interviews with students from all of the classes observed. However, to provide a sample of perspectives VS spoke to three Law students and nine Biochemistry students and we have incorporated their thoughts into the findings. All the participants were anonymised using random initials while maintaining the connection to their departments (e.g. Dr A, International Affairs; Student M, Biochemistry).

We analysed the interview data on Nvivo using thematic analysis. We used both an inductive and a deductive approach to create our central themes or codes, which were further divided into thirty-two sub-codes. Our thematic analysis led us to organise the data into five sections: ethnographic observations; activities observed; educator perspective; student perspective and teaching online.

4) Findings

a) Ethnographic Observations

During the observations, ethnographic notes were made on what behaviours, aside from teaching and learning, were taking place in the classroom. VS used literature on the antecedents of rapport (Granitz et al., 2009) to create an inventory of educator traits and behaviours that would have either a positive or negative impact on rapport. In parallel, she made notes on student behaviours that indicated whether rapport had been established or not.

Examples of the antecedents of rapport exhibited by educators in our study included the following: knowing and using student names; making eye contact; using humour; sharing personal experiences and opinions; checking if students have questions; remembering previous questions and comments; exuding a gentle expectation that students will contribute; listening to small group discussions without always intervening; and being available before and after class.

Student behaviours that were suggestive of there being a positive rapport in the room included the following: asking questions unprompted; being willing to answer questions; responding well to follow up questions; sharing personal experiences and opinions; smiling, laughing and other examples of positive body language such as leaning in; using the educator's name; contributing verbally; actively making notes; and sorting themselves into groups with little prompting.

This student survey comment is indicative of what good rapport feels like from a student perspective. It came from an MA seminar where many of the antecedents of rapport and positive student behaviours described above were observed.

> *"Dr. A does a good job at encouraging conversation when we get stuck and ensuring that we feel comfortable speaking even when we don't have a hundred percent confidence in our thoughts." [Student L, International Relations]*

As our participants were educators who had previously expressed an interest in building rapport, it is perhaps unsurprising that behaviours that discouraged rapport were less in evidence. However, some such behaviours were observed included asking questions significantly ahead of students' understanding; not using student names; and putting students in groups they had not chosen. In the online observations, students having their cameras and microphones on significantly increased the visible and aural signifiers of rapport.

b) Activities observed

In the eleven sessions observed, the rapport-building activities were split fairly evenly between icebreakers and group work, with five educators using icebreakers, five using group work and one conducting a complex online 'Escape Room' that brought in elements of both.

(i) Icebreakers

Icebreakers can be broadly defined as short activities designed to 'break the ice' between participants by building connections or breaking down barriers. They are often used at the start of a class to encourage participation and develop a shared focus but I also observed them being used as a mid-session 're-energiser'.

The icebreakers observed included, 'what did you do in reading week?'; 'find someone with the same initial as you'; and 'describe what is outside your window without telling the truth'.

The educators interviewed said they found icebreakers useful for three main purposes: learning names and pronunciations; encouraging connections with and amongst students; and 'warming up' students for the lesson ahead.

> *"It's mainly to try to encourage them to actually speak in the class because I've had experiences before, mainly as an undergrad actually rather than as a lecturer, when nobody wants to answer any questions. It just warms people up and then they seem happier to speak in front of the whole group."* (Ms B, Law)

One notable example of an icebreaker was a game of 'People Bingo' which took place mid-session during a biochemistry workshop. This activity is a twist on the traditional game of bingo, with each table given the same sheet of paper to complete (Figure 3).

> *"There are about 25 boxes, one of them had content, 'can you name all 20 amino acids from memory'. The rest were just little factoids. Is anyone wearing pink? Has anyone never seen snow? Does anyone have a pet that's not a cat or a dog? You know just little things.*

What I notice is they [the students] all kind of lean in because I put one piece of paper down." (Dr H, Biochemistry)

People Bingo: Find (at least) one person in your group who meets each of the criteria below. Write their name/s in the appropriate square. Call out 'Bingo' if you are the first team to fill a vertical or horizontal line, or get a 'full house'				
Has broken a bone	Can speak 3 or more languages	Has at least one of the letters X, Y or Z in their name	Can knit or crochet	Has a connection with a country beginning with 'I'
Has a pet that is not a cat or a dog	Can play a musical instrument	Has a connection with the sea	Has had their name and/or picture in the newspaper	Has worked in a shop or restaurant
Has (at least) one brother and one sister	Is wearing something pink	Can name all 20 amino acids from memory (test them!)	Can't swim	Has played sport for their school
Has run a race of 5KM of more	Sings in a band of choir	Is wearing a hat or heard covering	Has their birthday in the same month as another on the team	Has never seen snow
Can stand on their head	Has met a world leader	Has a driving license	Is left-handed	Took the London Underground to campus today

Figure 3 – People Bingo

This is an example of an icebreaker that combines a 'getting to know you' activity with specific subject knowledge. During the game of People Bingo, a number of positive student behaviours were observed such as sharing personal experiences; physically leaning in towards each other; smiling and laughing; asking each other questions and communicating freely with the tutor and graduate teaching assistants.

(ii) Group work

Group work, as the term implies, is where students work together to share information, answer a question or solve a problem. This can comprise a simple peer discussion in twos, threes or a larger group; a jigsaw framework where each student undertakes a reading or task and feeds back to the group; or a more complex presentation or project. Group work aims to give students collaborative skills and can provide a less exposed space for them to share thoughts and ideas.

> *"Group work is a good way of activating students who would usually be less confident to speak up in front of the whole group. Every time I use small groups I see that happening, that students who tend to be a bit more reserved a bit more quiet, they open up, they feel much more confident to speak in smaller groups."* (Dr A, International Relations)

With peer discussions, the educator tends to move from group to group, sometimes just listening in, at other times praising or prompting further discussion. The educators interviewed suggested that group work can help to create a genuine, honest, learning community; encourage marginalised students to engage and contribute; and are a useful way to gauge student understanding.

> *"I also get them to work on collaborative documents a lot and they might be doing a peer review or a review in groups. I think that's quite a good way of getting to know each other. Also by having to give peer feedback, helping them through that process, there's a sort of honesty about being a critical friend as opposed to just saying "oh that's very nice" and being all polite about it, I think that's important for building rapport."* (Ms D, King's Foundations)

> *"They are an opportunity for me to assess how much the students are getting, trying to push their understanding, helping them to push the boundaries a little bit of what they know. So a big part of that is you get them talking and you sit and you listen."* (Mr C, King's Foundations)

So while all participants described their icebreaker and group work activities as being 'rapport-building', in the minds of the educators, rapport has an educational purpose that is achieved through relational means. In the next section we will examine these purposes more closely.

c) The Educator Perspective

As outlined above, the educators we spoke to were largely in agreement about the value of both icebreakers and group work within their practice. During the interviews, we asked them to expand upon why they found these activities to be significant.

Dr A explained that by using strategies to build trust and rapport, he is not only able to enhance the learning experience for his students but is better able to assess their progress as well.

> *"You need a certain level of trust among students and also between the students and their tutor. I always tell my students, this is the space where you can practice your ideas, where you can ask questions and you can develop thoughts even if they are not 100% thought through. So there is no judgment in any way and there are no stupid questions. For that I think then there is a certain level of trust necessary. There is a functional element to this on my part as an instructor. I need to see to what extent are students actually progressing on the module, to what extent is there a learning outcome and I think for that having a specific rapport with the student is very important."* (Dr A, International Relations)

Another element that emerged strongly in the interviews was the importance of educator-student encounters beyond the timetabled sessions. Despite managing a high workload in terms of teaching, marking and research work, the majority of educators in this study valued the chance to engage with students outside the classroom.

Our educator participants cited a 'meet the faculty' pizza party; an Arabic calligraphy workshop; informal course drinks; guest appearances at student societies and informal chats before and after class as useful ways to build rapport. These encounters serve a range of purposes including humanising the educator; encouraging student networks and friendships; and improving mental health and well-being for both staff and students.

Dr F (Biochemistry) has observed that this broader interaction with the university is crucial for student development.

> *"The students who develop that rapport with each other and with the staff become much more confident about their learning. I also think they're going to come over much better when they apply for placements and for jobs. And the students who don't develop that confidence to interact with us probably don't get that sense of belonging which in my view is important - and I think there's literature to back this up. So they may do well academically, but they probably miss out a bit on some of the aspects of university, the social capital aspects, those kind of things."*

Each year Dr A (International Relations) organises an informal drinks event for his students and notices a change in the class dynamic afterwards.

> *"I do notice that students are more relaxed, that they are more confident at questions, I notice that the group feeling in the seminar improves. I mean, causality is always difficult, but that is my impression at least."*

A number of educators told us about other positive signs they observed following the introduction of regular rapport-building activities into their taught sessions. These included better teamwork; higher marks in weekly tests; improved attendance; and increased participation from marginalised students.

When our educators were asked which students they considered to be underserved or marginalised, before mentioning race, social class or neurodiversity, many educators cited students educated outside the UK, particularly those from Confucian educational cultures. Ms D (King's Foundations) teaches international students and has developed strategies to build rapport and encourage greater participation.

> *"My experience with Chinese students is that they don't really ask questions. As a way of getting round that I'll let them put questions on the chat or I also have a document up in Teams which they can write anonymously. Certainly that's been something which has gone down particularly well with Chinese students, and they often will use that because for whatever reason, sometimes it's to do with their accent, sometimes it's to do with speaking English, sometimes it's to do with just they come from a culture where you don't ask questions and I would rather that we addressed that in class. So the rapport side is I get to know them and they get to know me."* Ms D (King's Foundations)

Dr E (Modern Languages) observed that as the educator, she too benefits from improved rapport in the classroom. This aspect was also mentioned by the educator participants in our workshops and is an area that might benefit from further study

> *"We feed from each other in terms of our energy, our resources, our mental health and obviously intellectual fulfilment. I think the benefits couldn't be overestimated for both sides."* (Dr E, Modern Languages)

It should be noted that by recruiting our participants through workshops and word of mouth, they were to an extent self-selecting as being interested in building rapport with their students. It

would be useful to conduct a similar research project with educators who had not previously considered actively trying to build rapport with their students.

d) The Student Perspective

As outlined in the Methodology section, we requested that our educator participants send a short survey (Figure 2) to all students who attended the observed sessions. The survey asked students to rate two statements on a 5 point scale ranging from Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree and included a free text box for comments.

Response rates ranged from 1 student out of a class of 12 to 25 students out of a class of 70. In total, 66 students responded to the survey of whom 17 (25%) wrote a comment in the free text box.

Common Ground Research Project – Student Survey Results Table

Statement 1: By the end of the activity, I felt more connected to my tutor and fellow students
Statement 2: I would recommend that my tutor use this activity or a similar one with other students

Statement	Subject	Strongly Agree	Somewhat Agree	Neither	Somewhat Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Total
1 – felt more connected	Law	7	2	-	-	-	9
	Biochemistry Workshops	8	15	2	-	-	25
	Biochemistry Induction	1	3	5	1	-	10
	Russian	2	3	1	1	-	7
	Medicine	2	4	1	-	-	7
	Conflict Studies MA	5	1	-	-	-	6
	King's Foundations	1	-	-	-	-	1
	Global Affairs MA	1	-	-	-	-	1
Total		27	28	9	2	0	66
2 – recommend use again	Law	7	1	-	-	-	8
	Biochemistry Workshops	6	10	2	-	-	18
	Biochemistry Induction	2	5	-	1	1	9
	Russian	2	2	2	-	-	6
	Medicine	2	2	1	1	-	6
	Conflict Studies MA	6	-	-	-	-	6
	King's Foundations	1	-	-	-	-	1
	Global Affairs MA	1	-	-	-	-	1
Total		27	20	5	2	1	55

Figure 4 – Student Survey Results Table

The survey data indicate that the rapport-building activities designed for students by their educators do bring valued connections for students.

Figure 4 shows that 55 out of 66 students (83%) either agreed or strongly agreed with statement 1 ('By the end of the activity, I felt more connected to my tutor and fellow students') and 47 out of 55 students (85%) either agreed or strongly agreed with statement 2 ('I would recommend that my tutor use this activity or a similar one with other students').

The seventeen comments that students entered into the free text box can be broadly split into three categories. There were seven comments that were unequivocally supportive such as:

> *"The icebreaker activities made us students at the table feel freer and chat to each other during the Practical Skills Workshop."* [Student M, Biochemistry]

There were eight comments that were essentially supportive of the idea of rapport-building activities but suggested ways to improve them. For example:

> *"I think it was a creative idea but a more interactive icebreaker could've been slightly better - maybe introducing yourself to everyone and finding out something you have a common with someone else in the room?"* [Student N, Medicine]

Finally, there were two comments from students who had struggled during the online 'Escape Room' activity which had used multiple breakout rooms. During the session itself VS observed that while some breakout groups gelled immediately, a few groups were entirely silent. One student wrote:

> *"My group mates didn't respond to the discussion I was trying to initiate. Hence I prefer doing this group activity physically."* [Student O, Biochemistry]

There is a fuller discussion of the issues that arose around online teaching in the next section.

Analysing the full range of written comments alongside the survey suggests that students value well-planned rapport-building activities that take account of potential pitfalls. This conclusion is supported by the interviews with Biochemistry and Law students.

Short interviews were conducted with nine Biochemistry students while they were taking part in a lab session. All students without exception spoke favourably about the icebreakers (such as 'People Bingo') used in their workshops.

> *"We have to do a quiz after and we all have to talk and the icebreaker makes everyone feel comfortable sharing answers and, weirdly, I feel comfortable being wrong after it because I feel I've bonded with these people now."* (Student S, Biochemistry)

A number of students also talked about how good rapport with their tutors and lecturers has a positive impact on their learning.

> *"If I feel like the lecturer is more human, I'm more interested in the lectures, I'm more likely to remember the lectures and the content as well. When someone talks and their personality just shines through, you feel like they're more human, more relatable."* (Student T, Biochemistry)

VS also spoke to three second-year law students about their tutor's rapport-building activities. One student said that Ms J's regular use of icebreakers meant he was more likely to reach out to her than to his other tutors.

> *"If I have a problem, I'd be more confident about emailing her because she is a lot more personal, and she puts more effort into things like those icebreakers then others sometimes do." (Student P, Law)*

This raises the question of whether rapport-building educators will invite and receive more requests for support from students that they may not have the resources to fulfil.

Another student said that Ms J's approach contributes to an atmosphere of trust and openness that means he's never reluctant to attend, despite the tutorial being held on a Friday afternoon.

> *"It probably is my favourite hour of the week and also it's slightly clichéd but I'm happy to make a fool of myself in that class. And if I answer a question that is the furthest possible thing from the right answer, I don't feel judged at all in that class. Whereas in others, unless I'm 100% confident in what I'm saying, I wouldn't say it because I would be scared to make an of idiot myself."* (Student Q, Law)

It seems noteworthy that both groups of students mentioned that good rapport allows you 'feel comfortable being wrong' or to 'make a fool' of yourself. In the educator interviews this feeling of trust was seen as significant for higher level learning.

At the end of the group interview, the law students were asked for advice on how an educator could improve the level of rapport in their classroom, regardless of their natural personality.

> *"Just being curious, showing interest in your students. I guess that will sometimes be harder because some tutors just will be more introverted and others more confident but generally I think having that certain curiosity and interest in students. And the students and the tutor just not being too hesitant about approaching each other."* (Student R, Law)

This idea that both students and educators can contribute to building rapport in the classroom echoes the conclusions of Ms E (Modern Languages) quoted in the section above.

VS discussed this aspect in an interview with Dr Vogel, the only participant who was teaching other educators (on the LTP Learning and Teaching Programme) rather than students. Dr Vogel agreed that the expectation of professionalism inculcated into educators often enables rapport to develop among educators as learners more quickly:

> *"They've mastered quite a lot of interpersonal skills and there are expectations around professionalism, so even if it doesn't come as naturally to you, I think you're going to be at least entering into it. And they've signed up for LTP, and hopefully they've read that these are participatory sessions, and I think they know enough to be quite curious about each other."* (Dr Vogel, LTP)

This opens up the idea that it might be productive to actively inform students about the significance of good educator-student rapport to their learning.

> *"I think laying bare those purposes and the difference that it makes if you do get involved, get stuck in, listen and talk, I think that that really helps. Generally the advice is always to try and make an educational case for everything that you do in the classroom so that students know how it relates to their success."* (Dr Vogel, LTP)

Pulling together the student interviews, written comments and survey, we can conclude that students are aware of and appreciate their educators' attempts to build rapport in the classroom. Overall, they tell us that it contributes both to their sense of well-being and their ability to learn. It would be interesting to take this to the next level by informing students of the evidence base for the significance of educator-student rapport.

e) Teaching online

The observations in this study were conducted during the early stages of opening up after the coronavirus lockdowns. Six of the observations were conducted online and five in person and all our educator participants were experienced at teaching in both environments, often switching between them on the same day. Perhaps unsurprisingly, all the educators found it easier to build rapport with students face to face.

Dr B describes the experience of running the same rapport-building activity online and then in person on the same day.

> *"I think the main difference is that in the in-person group it's a little easier to have a more natural flow to the conversation because students also are less inhibited in responding to each other. So in the in-person group, while somebody was speaking, somebody else would say "oh, can I add something to that?" or "sorry to interrupt but I also think". And in the online group people are waiting for their turn or they feel like they need to raise their hands before they can start talking, which is of course part of good Teams etiquette but then I felt like I had to be much more in command of structuring the conversation than in the in-person group."* (Dr B, Global Affairs)

As well as students appearing to be more inhibited online, Dr B suggests that it is also harder for educators to identify students who are struggling.

> *"In the in-person group I find it easier to observe body language. I can see which students are responding with a kind of engaging body language or which students seem to be feeling a little bit intimidated or alienated in the group, which is much more difficult to read in an online setting."* (Dr B, Global Affairs)

Dr H (Biochemistry) observed that while there may be advantages to having online lectures, taught sessions like seminars, workshops, practicals and tutorials are invariably better in person:

> *"I find students are much more engaged learning in person. Lectures can be online if they need to because that tends to be one person talking, you're focused, you can stop, you can start, because maybe you don't pay attention at 9:00am, maybe you pay attention better at 10:00pm and that's when you want to listen to your lectures. But for practicals, for these workshops, it's a chance for the students to really engage with the faculty, engage with one another.*" (Dr H, Biochemistry)

So how do educators overcome these difficulties? Ms D found that having an icebreaker at the start of each session became even more important when teaching online.

> *"I think it's very easy for students, particularly online, to feel a bit invisible and that they're not quite people so it's sort of a way of acknowledging them as individuals."* Ms D (King's Foundations)

Dr G (Biochemistry) ran an ambitious online 'Escape Room' with mixed results. Students who found themselves in a lively, cohesive breakout room loved the activity while students who could not get their colleagues to engage online struggled to get the most out of it. I asked one student to describe her online breakout room.

> *"Mine was quite quiet, no one really talked, it was awkward. There were no cameras on, mics were on for a bit but after a few minutes everyone turned them off and got on with everything by themselves. We didn't really talk about the answers after that. I think in person would have been good, I feel like meeting people face to face is always going to be much better than doing it in a breakout room."* (Student R, Biochemistry)

Dr G says while she would always prefer to run the session in person, she has thought about how to improve the experience for students if she was to run a similar activity online again.

> *"If we did it online I would make the puzzle slightly easier and I would also put an official icebreaker in [to the breakout rooms] where I told them in advance, introduce yourselves, tell them your name, put your cameras on, the mics on, unless you got a good reason not to, and then I would also probably put it in the instructions on the first page of the exercise. I'd probably set those ground rules a little bit tighter."* (Dr G, Biochemistry)

Overall, both educators and students seem to find it easier to build rapport in person than online. However, when a taught session has to take place online, there are a number of strategies educators can use such as starting with an icebreaker; simplifying tasks; clarifying or repeating instructions; telling students to introduce themselves in breakout rooms; and asking students to keep their cameras and microphones on if possible.

5) Conclusions

The Common Ground project found that King's educators use a range of strategies, in and out of the classroom, to build rapport with their students. These include learning student names; using icebreakers; integrating group work into their teaching; planning and attending extracurricular activities; being approachable; and making time to be available to students outside taught sessions. We also found that it is possible to observe the consequences of good rapport in student behaviours such as their verbal engagement, level of confidence and body language.

Our research indicates that in-class rapport-building activities such as icebreakers and group work are considered valuable and worthwhile by both educators and their students and appear to deliver a number of positive outcomes.

From the educator's perspective, it produces an atmosphere of trust, gives students a sense of belonging and provides a greater opportunity for marginalised students to engage. Furthermore, educators report that it gives students the trust and confidence to 'ask stupid questions' and take risks with their answers, both of which are seen as crucial to accessing higher level learning.

Similarly, students told us that rapport-building activities help them to connect with their classmates, engage with the content, feel relaxed about being wrong and to stretch themselves academically. Additionally, a good relationship with their tutor enables students to feel personally supported and means they are more likely to ask for help.

Although this study was not intended as a comparison of online and in-person learning, having observed rapport-building activities in both environments, we are able to draw some broad conclusions. Both educator and student participants agreed that it is harder to build rapport online than face to face. However, our educators have uncovered useful strategies for growing rapport online including starting sessions with an introductory icebreaker; simplifying group tasks; asking students to introduce themselves to each other in breakout rooms; printing or posting written instructions; and asking students to keep their cameras and microphones on if possible. A question for future study would be to ask how educators and students build rapport in timetabled sessions where some cameras are switched off.

This was a small scale study that will hopefully inspire further research. Our participants had already expressed an interest in building rapport in the classroom so it might be useful to conduct a similar project with educators who do not currently use rapport-building activities. It might also be valuable to run a more student-focussed project, looking at the impact of rapport on different groups of students, including well-served and underserved groups. Additionally, we would be interested in studying the impact of actively informing students about the research evidence supporting rapport-building activities to see if this enables them to develop the element of professionalism found in the LTP cohort.

We presented our preliminary conclusions at the 2022 King's Academy Learning and Teaching festival to an audience that included three of our educator participants. After the presentation, we were lucky enough to attend the Student Panel where two King's students independently confirmed our findings when they talked about how they enjoyed harder modules where they had a good relationship with their tutors more than easier modules where that positive rapport was missing.

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