

# Designed for Learning Ep5 Transcript

## Building Rapport in Online Courses (May 1, 2025)

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**Guest:** Rebecca Glazier

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[JIM LANG]

Welcome to Designed for Learning, a podcast from Notre Dame Learning. I'm your host, Jim Lang.

This semester, I have been taking a self-paced online course on learning led by Barbara Oakley, which is fantastic and something I really recommend to our listeners. It will be in the show notes.

So, I've learned a lot and I really enjoyed the experience, but it still doesn't quite feel the same to me as walking to a-- in a physical classroom, sitting down with other humans, and having those kinds of informal encounters that we have, for example, as we're walking out the classroom doorway, or like, seeing someone on campus and having informal conversations with people. So it just didn't feel the same to me in that one area.

So, I'm learning a lot, but I'm kinda missing that in-person interactions with people in the physical classroom. So, it got me thinking about the ways to build community among teachers and students when we are sort of all sitting behind screens.

And so, what, what can make that happen and, and why does it matter? Today, we're gonna discuss that question with Rebecca Glazier, who is a political science professor in the School of Public Affairs at University of Arkansas at Little Rock. She studies the scholarship of teaching and learning and is passionate about improving the quality of online education. She's the author of *Connecting the Online Classroom: Building Rapport between Teachers and Students*, which was published by Johns Hopkins University Press in 2021.

Rebecca, welcome.

[REBECCA GLAZIER]

Thank you so much. It's great to be here. And I love that introduction you gave because it really shows how online learning can increase access.

You get to take a class that you wouldn't have otherwise been able to take. But also, it has this big problem of people not feeling connected to each other.

[JIM LANG]

I love that because it puts the focus here on a positive way of thinking about online teaching and learning. And we're talking about that subject this month because we know that many instructors teach courses online in the summer, and we have a great program for that here at Notre Dame.

Let me start by asking you what your journey has been like through online teaching and learning and, and what got you interested in this subject.

[REBECCA GLAZIER]

Absolutely. So for me, it has been quite a journey. Like a lot of online instructors, I came to teaching online with no experience at all. (laughs) I had never taught an online class before. When I graduated with my PhD and I, I started teaching, I had a couple classes in person and then my university just said, "And here's an online class." I had never even taken an online class before, so I was definitely thrown into the deep end right away. (laughs)

And it took me probably longer than it should have, a few semesters, to figure out that even though I was teaching my in-person Introduction to Political Science class with the same textbook and the same lectures and the same assignments as my online Introduction to Political Science class, my students were not learning the same things. They weren't achieving at the same levels.

In fact, my online students, they were failing and they were dropping out at significantly higher rates.

So, that's when I really started to research this problem. I'm a, a social scientist trained as a political scientist, so I just looked at it like a puzzle and said, "What's going on with my classes? Why are my online students not doing as well?" And through conversations with other faculty, diving into the literature, and talking with my students, I figured out that what was missing was exactly what you identified at the top there, that we didn't feel connected to one another. The students didn't see me as a real person who cared about their learning.

I was just some professor, or even worse, like a automatic robot just grading their things off there in the void. And so I started a five-year teaching experiment where I taught some classes

with lots of connection and rapport and really reaching out to students and building that up. And then other classes, I just kept teaching the same way I had been.

And that's where I really saw the data to show me that that connection really is key to helping online students succeed.

[JIM LANG]

That must have been actually challenging for you to have these courses in which you were sort of aware of them, maybe you could have been doing more stuff to build that rapport, and yet you really couldn't for the experiment, right? Was it-- Did- sort of emotional stuff going on there for you during that sort of part of the process?

[REBECCA GLAZIER]

Yeah. That's such a great question. I would say that I had mixed emotions because I had designed the experiment so that the students that I was doing high rapport and high engagement with, that kind of took a lot of my time and I couldn't just shoot off an email-

[JIM LANG]

Ah.

[REBECCA GLAZIER]

-- that said, "Read the syllabus." I had to-- Because of the experimental design, I had to write, "Thank you so much for asking. That's a great question. Look in the syllabus at this part and let me know if you need anything else."

And so sometimes I was just gritting my teeth while I typed out those emails, and I wanted to just say, "Read the syllabus. Leave me alone." (Jim laughs) But once I saw the data start to come in, once I had enough that I could analyze it, I saw that difference that it was making for my online students and I was like, "I can't run this experiment any longer. I can't collect any more data 'cause I feel like it's almost unethical to not be engaging with students in a way that I know helps them."

[JIM LANG]

So, I remember actually seeing your, your book title for the first time and the word that really stuck out for me was rapport. And it's kind of unusual.

That word wasn't really, not in the discourse in terms of online teaching and learning. So, tell me about that word and how it helped you sort of get a better understanding of what you needed to do in your online courses.

[REBECCA GLAZIER]

Yeah. I actually pulled it from some research that's been done in in-person classes about that connection that's made between professors and students. And so, rapport is really about letting students know that you care about their success and you're on their side. So, it takes good communication, it takes giving students feedback, and it really takes acting like a human person. (laughs)

You have to show a little bit of yourself to make that connection with students. But once you do, the data shows that the students are more invested in the class and they're gonna do better work and earn better grades.

[JIM LANG]

So let me---- stay for just a second here, in terms of your experience, like, emotionally from this process. Like, did you have a sense when you started teaching online initially, like, it wasn't as enjoyable as when you've started building that rapport into it? Did that, was that part of the process for you, feeling more connected and more, just enjoying your online teaching more?

[REBECCA GLAZIER]

Yeah. That was actually a really nice side benefit, because I went into it trying to help my students, right? I wanted more of my students to be learning, to be engaged, to stop failing and withdrawing from the class.

But what I found was that I actually enjoyed teaching more when we had this high degree of rapport and connection. So, when I first started teaching online, I would sometimes forget for entire days that I even had an online class.

[JIM LANG]

Oh.

[REBECCA GLAZIER]

I wasn't checking in regularly with the discussion boards. I wasn't thinking of how to create new content that would really engage my students. I was loving teaching my in-person classes, but sometimes I would just forget about my online classes.

And when I moved to this high-rapport teaching strategy, it totally shifted, and the students met me there as well. So, I wasn't bored and disengaged myself from the class, but the students were engaged, and I was engaged, and everybody had a better teaching and learning experience.

[JIM LANG]

That's really interesting because Flower Darby sometimes says one of her critiques with online courses is people treat them like slow pot, like slow cookers essentially, right? So, you, you put this, you know, course in, in the cooker, and then you just let it go, right, and assume it's gonna sort of run itself.

But you're arguing, as she argues as well, you can't do that. You have to be in touch frequently and be checking with students but also engaging with them on a regular basis.

[REBECCA GLAZIER]

Yeah, absolutely. And I think the point that you make is really an important one, that that is not only good for students, but it's also good for us as teachers, because a lot of people who teach online say that they miss that contact. They miss that give-and-take of discussion. But if we can think of creative ways to make that happen in our online classes, our students will be better served by it and we'll like teaching those classes more.

[JIM LANG]

Yeah. That's great. So, you know I'm a person who's always interested in what happens in the actual teaching process, so, I'm gonna ask you to give some ideas about what would it look like for you to build that rapport in an online course.

[REBECCA GLAZIER]

Yeah. I have tons of ideas, and the great thing is that I'm always learning new ones from my colleagues, from just trying things out, from reading out there. There's lots of great people writing in this subject. Advice that I would give is to start as early as possible with making these connections with students.

So, even before the semester starts, before the first day of class, do something to reach out to your students. Send them an email, send a message through the learning management system, but do something to let students know. Make a good first impression with them.

Let them know that you're there to help them, and you want them to succeed in the class. And I think that it's really important that when you're building rapport with students, that you're doing it your own way. So, I'll have tons of examples, but those might not be the examples that fit your personality or work well with you.

And the thing about connecting is that humans are really good at telling when people are not sincere and not authentic. So, if you're just performing rapport in the way you think it should happen, the students aren't gonna respond. But if you bring your, your real self, your authentic self, then they'll meet you there, and it'll be a more engaging class.

So, I do that by, like, putting jokes in my syllabus, by recording videos that are friendly, telling them what's going on in my life. Sometimes I'll have a discussion thread that doesn't have anything to do with the content of the course. We'll just talk about the best place to get tacos or what our favorite animals are, or people will drop pictures of their pets in there.

And all of that can make the course feel like more of a community.

[JIM LANG]

Is--typically, are you teaching synchronous or asynchronous courses?

[REBECCA GLAZIER]

Almost all of my classes are asynchronous, which makes it--

[JIM LANG]

Asynchronous.

[REBECCA GLAZIER]

--even harder to connect with students. (laughs)

[JIM LANG]

Right, right. Exactly, yeah, 'cause in a synchronous class you can sort of do those jokings, joking asides, for example, in like a, you know, discussion. But this is even challenging, more challenging in these contexts, right?

[REBECCA GLAZIER]

Absolutely. And I think that sometimes we feel like we don't have to bring our full self to an asynchronous class, and I know that students who are taking asynchronous online classes sometimes feel like they're almost second-class. They're not getting all the things that students who are in person are getting, and they're not getting, like, that casual contact that you talked about, chatting before and after class, and that's a lot of times where students learn about graduate school or about internship opportunities or are able to ask a question that they weren't comfortable asking in front of everyone else in the class.

So, I think that the key thing, especially in asynchronous classes, is for us as the professors to reach out to students. We need to make the first move. We need to email them, even if they're doing well in the class, and say, "I wanted to check in on you. How are you doing? I see that you scored X. Great job. I'm so proud of you," or, "I see that you haven't been in our discussions for a week or two. Is everything okay? Is there anything I can do for you?"

Those kinds of proactive reaches can really make a big difference.

[JIM LANG]

So, let's be realistic here, though, 'cause you're-- all these things you're saying, you actually referred to it earlier that the fact it takes more time, right? And so, there's a little bit of that we have to be aware of that, right? So more, building rapport absolutely takes time for the instructor and investment of time and energy, right?

I mean, there's no way to get around that, right? Yeah. (laughs)

[REBECCA GLAZIER]

Yep. That's the, that's the hard trade-off. Uh, but when I look at the data, as I was saying earlier, I feel like I can't teach any other way because I know what a difference it makes for my students. There are some tips and tricks, some hacks that you can use to try to make things a little bit easier.

For instance, mail merge is a lifesaver for me. So I send my students lots of personalized emails that come directly to them with their first name in it, their scores, a comment specific to that score. But I do it through mail merge, so I just have to create the spreadsheet and then click Go, and then 30 students all get a personalized email checking in with them. But I only had to write one email.

[JIM LANG]

Yeah. Okay, so that's smart. So there's things that you can do for sure, right? Yeah. But I'm--going back to something you mentioned earlier, we can keep in mind overall, you know, the purpose of this is to get more people into, into higher education, right?

And so keeping that idea in mind, doing these courses is creating greater access for people who maybe can't come to this campus. And so is that--I'm sure that helps you give you a sense of purpose when you're doing this work.

[REBECCA GLAZIER]

Yeah, online classes are a whole game changer for students who might be underserved by the traditional university system, maybe because they're working or they have a family or they have other obligations that they can't always attend class. And even students who are living in the dorms and are on campus, they're taking online classes too because maybe they are on a sports team or maybe they wanna leave for a study abroad but still wanna knock out a summer class. So that flexibility is helping all kinds of students.

[JIM LANG]

So you actually taught online courses both before and after the pandemic, right? I mean, so your journey's kind of crossed over that divide. So can you talk a little bit about that? Like what, what you've noticed that's different or what's--have we seen benefits from the pandemic in terms of online teaching and learning or ... Yeah, what's your, your thoughts about that?

[REBECCA GLAZIER]

Yeah. Online teaching during the pandemic was definitely different than online teaching before the pandemic. And I think that because of COVID-19, a lot of institutions and students and professors saw the value of online teaching but also saw how hard it is to do it well. There are faculty who were all of a sudden thrown into online teaching with only a week to prepare, and it's really hard to do it well under those circumstances. So some students had poor experiences, some faculty had poor experiences because of that condensed timeframe.

But I think also people realized how beneficial it can be to students who aren't able to come to campus because they live too far away or they're immune-compromised. There are all kinds of reasons why they would want to take those online classes, and they can be such a benefit for them in helping them finish a college degree.

[JIM LANG]

Yeah. And so actually you have--you're in Arkansas. Do you have people mostly who are coming from Arkansas taking the classes or do people come from around the, you know, other parts of the country?

[REBECCA GLAZIER]

Yeah, at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock, most of our students are from Arkansas, but sometimes we have students who, for instance, get deployed with the military or who move out of state halfway through their degree, and they're able to finish up online when otherwise they wouldn't be able to.

[JIM LANG]

Yeah. Okay. So, you know, we mentioned earlier the sort of--the mail merge thing, right? And so it's kind of a way of using technology to support what you're trying to do here.

So this brings to mind a subject which is on many people's minds right now, artificial intelligence, and I think -here we can think about, you know, both opportunities and challenges. And so, you know, give me your sense of what AI is doing to your teaching or your thinking about teaching, either online or even in your in-person classes at this point in your career.

[REBECCA GLAZIER]

I do think there's some really good research out there about why it is that students would do something that might be perceived as cheating, and a lot of times it's because they don't think that the assignment is important, it doesn't matter to them, they don't see it as meaningful for their learning experience. So I think on the front end there's a lot that we can do as professors to try to create assignments that are more meaningful to students so that they don't feel like they're just jumping through hoops, but they're actually learning something.

But on the other hand, I do think we can't pretend like AI doesn't exist. I think that policies that say, "Absolutely no, you can't use it in any way, shape, or form in this class," I don't think they're realistic.

So I've actually started, in my intro level classes, giving the students an AI assignment where they actually use it to take some steps at the beginning of some of their research or for a bigger assignment in the class, and then they have to write a one-page assessment of how well it did, where it might be useful, and then we talk about how maybe generating initial ideas, helping you find research, those could be ways that AI could help you, but how it's not ethical to have AI write your research paper.

[JIM LANG]

Yeah. Have you done much playing around with it yourself, AI?

[REBECCA GLAZIER]

A little bit. I find that AI much better knows what I am looking for when I can't find an article than myself trying to enter Google search terms. So I'll just say-

[JIM LANG]

Interesting.

[REBECCA GLAZIER]

-- "Hey, I remember there was this, this experiment. It involved Israelis and Palestinians. I think it was in the 1980s." And they'll know exactly what it was, but my search terms would never have found that, so.

[JIM LANG]

Yeah. So for your online courses, your asynchronous classes, what kind of assessments are you using? Are you using typically like, you know, papers, discussion posts? Tests? What are you- what are you doing in those? What's the mix of assessments?

[REBECCA GLAZIER]

Yeah, I have a solid mix including tests, writing assignments, and weekly discussion posts. In my 1000 level intro American National Government class, I really wanna help those students stay engaged because a lot of them are taking online classes for the first time, a lot of freshmen, people who are in college in their very first or second semester. And so for that class I have the students have a weekly discussion post and a weekly quiz, and the quiz is on their readings in the textbook, on the content that I, do a video lecture on. But every week I add a question to the quiz that is just a check-in question, and they get a free point if they answer it.

I ask them how they're doing, I might ask them----what they're binge-watching. I might ask them, "If they could only eat one dessert for the rest of their lives, what would it be?" (Jim laughs) And that gives us a chance to build rapport and, and connect with each other.

[JIM LANG]

Yeah.

[REBECCA GLAZIER]

And just lets the students tell me if something is going on with them, something they're struggling with, and I can give feedback to them right there on their quiz.

[JIM LANG]

I mean, the answer to that question is obviously ice cream, chocolate ice cream. I mean--(laughs) Right? Okay. Great. We're gonna get together and have ice cream together at one point. (laughs)

All right, so, you know, as I was saying, you know, we have a program here, Summer Online, and there will always be new instructors teaching online for the first time, right? So, you've probably watched many instructors and you, you remember your own journey, right? So, like, what are the sort of trouble areas that people often have as they're sort of starting to teach online? For example, things that maybe you, you remember being surprised at or things that you really struggled with in your early journeys, or you've seen other people struggle with in teaching online for the first time?

[REBECCA GLAZIER]

Yeah. I think that discussion boards is a real sticky place. So, we want students to be engaged and discussing, but a discussion board just isn't the same as an in-class discussion, in both positive and negative ways. Because in an in-class discussion, those smart but shy students may never say a word.

But in an online post, they're able to take the time that they need to type out exactly what they wanna say. And because it's part of their grade and they're seeing every week they get graded on discussion, they're gonna make sure that their post is in there, so students who otherwise wouldn't speak up, we're able to hear from them.

But also, we sometimes have a tendency as professors to be very strict about the rules if we want students to be engaged, telling them, you know, "You need to make two posts, one reply, one original post. You need to do it on Monday, Wednesdays and Fridays. They have to be at least 100 words long." Those kinds of rules make students feel like they're just being controlled and like they're not really able to discuss in a natural way.

So, I dial back my rules. I just tell them, I want them to post twice, and they need to do it on different days. So, I want them to come back to the discussion, not just post and then be done and leave. I want them to come back and engage.

And I also work really hard to make sure that those discussion questions are things that the students might actually be interested in talking about. If there's a right and a wrong answer in your discussion, it is not gonna help engage students.

Another trick that I use is sometimes having the students be the discussion leaders, so different students are assigned throughout the semester to think of questions and to lead the discussion.

And so, they're much more invested that week, and the other students, hoping for good karma when it's their turn, are also more invested in the conversation.

[JIM LANG]

That's great. I actually love the principle of you have to just come back once, right? And if we can think about it like an in-person discussion, right? And I don't wanna just throw my idea out there and then just sit back for the rest of the discussion. I wanna see how my idea evolves and gets responded to, and then I'm gonna come back to that idea. So, I--that's a great principle to think about.

You have to come back one time, right? And check back in and see how it, the discussion evolved after your post. That's an easy principle to apply.

[REBECCA GLAZIER]

Yeah. The other thing with discussions is that sometimes professors either completely ignore the discussion themselves and never are in there, or else are super involved and replying to every single post. And honestly, I've been in both of those places. (laughs) When I was a brand new online teacher, I was like, "This is your discussion. Have fun."

And I didn't even go in there, just at the end to grade it. And so, I was completely absent from the students. We had no connection in discussion.

I maybe over-corrected when I went to that rapport-building. And I was in the discussion every single day, replying to every single student. And if my presence is so looming over the discussion, they might not be able to engage in the way that they really want, and it's exhausting for me as the professor.

So, what I do now, the happy medium that I've reached, is that I'll post every couple of days and engage with students in the discussion. And then, at the end of every week, I will look through and find a couple students who I thought really did a good job of contributing or added something meaningful, and I'll send them a personal email and tell them thank you for what they did and specify in that email how I saw them being really respectful or engaging in a thorny issue or providing useful links. So that they see that I'm really there, and then they're motivated to continue to participate well in discussions.

[JIM LANG]

I love that because it's bringing together these two sort of things you're talking about here, the rapport and the sort of reaching out to individual students, along with making good use of the discussion boards and trying to incentivize students to contribute to those discussion boards.

I think this--I agree with you, that this is a problem area. You know, there's been a lot of discussion about the value of these boards and especially now, there's even more discussion about that because of AI. But I think one thing I've learned, from our Canvas person here at Notre Dame is, you know, you can have people contribute to a discussion board not only with text but also with little videos, for example.

Like, if, like at our campus, we have Canvas, and so you can respond to a discussion board prompt by recording a two-minute video of yourself talking or even, like, uploading an audio file. And those are--you know, people can be creative about how to use a discussion board.

And so, I think you're right. They can be valuable, but we have to be, you know, we have to be aware of their challenges and the things they can create for students.

[REBECCA GLAZIER]

Yeah. And video or audio, or sometimes I even ask students in those little quiz questions to just send me a GIF or send me an emoji of how you're feeling about this week. And it just gives them an alternative way to kind of engage and respond and also feel a little bit lighthearted and connected, like we're a community that's learning together.

[JIM LANG]

That's great. Okay, so earlier I asked you just to think about, you know, some examples of building rapport in the classroom, and you kind of dodged the question, Rebecca.

So, I'm gonna come back to this now (laughs). 'Cause we're getting to the end of our time here together. So, I want you to think about now, sort of the, sort of takeaway moment in the podcast, I want you to think about, okay, so I'm teaching an online course, right? And now I want you to give me three things to start with as a teacher that I could do in, you know, as I'm designing my course, my first days, or even like a practice throughout the entire semester.

So, give me some concrete ideas.

[REBECCA GLAZIER]

Okay. (both laugh) I don't want you to feel like you got cheated listening to this podcast. (Jim laughs) Here are some concrete things that, that you can do.

Put a picture of yourself somewhere in the course. So, it may be that your learning management system allows you to add a profile picture, but then students will see you as a real person every time that you respond to discussions or message them or reach out to them.

So, that's an easy thing that, that you can do.

[JIM LANG]

Love it.

[REBECCA GLAZIER]

Something that is a little more intensive, but I love doing, is hide an Easter egg in your syllabus. So, what I do is I tell students--and really, it's not hidden. I have a whole heading that says, "Are you really reading this?" (Jim laughs) And then I tell them that if they've read the whole syllabus, to send me a picture of a panda in email.

And that way the students initiate contact and you get to reply back to them and welcome them to the class, say, "Thank you for the adorable panda," invite them to reach out if they need anything else, and my inbox gets flooded with panda pictures. (Jim laughs) So, that's one that I love doing also.

And then the third thing that I would say is to send personal emails to students. So, maybe it's using mail merge. Maybe it's reaching out to students after they've participated in discussion boards. Maybe it's reaching out to them when they haven't participated and you're missing them. But anything that you can do that lets students know that you know them as an individual, you've graded their personal assignment, you've seen their participation, helps them feel like they can ask if they need help and like you're really invested in teaching them.

[JIM LANG]

Okay. See, I'm glad I pushed you on that because those are great suggestions. (laughs) And actually, you know, I like the idea of the Easter egg. It's not, it's not like a little gimmick, it's also, it initiates the conversation through email.

Like, they now have to reach out to you, and then you can respond back to them. So, it's a great, it's a good, it's a great little, it's a trick, yes, but it's also a way of building that rapport, you know, starting the process of building that rapport.

[REBECCA GLAZIER]

And especially for first-generation students or underserved students, sending that initial email to a professor can be a really high hurdle. So letting them send that initial email in a fun and frivolous way that doesn't feel intimidating to them can actually build a really good foundation for your class.

[JIM LANG]

Yeah, that's great. And actually, to the three things you've already suggested, I'm gonna add the fourth, which you already mentioned, which is to send a, a note to students who did a good job

in a discussion board post and say, "I'm really glad that you posted this thing," or, "You did a good job of being respectful or pushing the conversation forward." And I think that's, that's wonderful. That's a great suggestion as well for folks who are gonna be teaching online for the first time.

So, thanks for those great suggestions.

[REBECCA GLAZIER]

No problem. Happy to do it.

[JIM LANG]

All right. So, thanks very much. We had a good rapport here, so it was good to have an opportunity to chat with you, Rebecca. Even though I know your work, we can create that same sense of connection here online when we're talking to each other on a podcast just as we can when we're reading each other's work. So, thanks very much for joining us today.

[REBECCA GLAZIER]

It's been my joy.

[JIM LANG]

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