

# **Rapport in the classroom: Problems and strategies**

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## **Abstract**

This paper presents a narrative self-study into the establishment of rapport in two university classrooms where the lecturers are seeking to implement critical literacy into their professional practices. It argues that rapport is a requisite for successful critical literacy teaching and that theoretical explorations of rapport should become an integral part of all critical pedagogy practices. This paper aims to encourage other teachers to reflect on, examine and discuss their understandings of rapport and rapport in their classrooms. The methodology for this paper is a collaborative self study, aiming to provide a critical friend to examine our teaching practices with honesty, support and objective insight. Our mutual observations, reflections and conversations provided the research data for our self study. We found that there were problems based on lack of rapport in both of our classes. This paper presents our key reflections and discussions on these two problems and the possible strategies we think could overcome them.

## **Introduction**

Change is a constant in education. Teachers and teacher educators need to continually revise and refresh, reflect and refocus, in order to keep moving toward a goal which is continually being redefined. Critical literacy is espoused as the way to help teachers reach these moving goals by creating learners who can function powerfully within our fast-paced, text-dense and complex societies (Anstey & Bull, 2004; Bull & Anstey, 2003; Luke, 2000; Morgan, Gilbert, Lankshear, Werba & Williams, 1996).

Critical literacy calls for transformations of students' and teachers' ideas and lives by opening up the assumptions which are embedded in culture and discourse, to critique and change. This can be applied to text in any situation. Questioning of texts is the basis of critical literacy. Examples of these questions include: How does the text position readers? Who does this positioning benefit? Who does it ignore? How might these roles be changed? (see Rowan, 2001).

Critical literacy methods can also be used to critique pedagogy through questioning of the self as well as the texts we use in the classroom. When the questions above are asked of our selves as teachers, the answers can be challenging, but potentially transformative. We took up this challenge as the basis for our self study asking: How do I position students? How do I relate to students? Who benefits? How might this situation be changed? As we were laying ourselves out for scrutiny, a collaborative effort allowed much needed support, as well as a 'mirror of truth' and an ability to reach deeper levels of reflexivity, by sharing discussions over time. We were particularly interested in examining how our critical pedagogies were translated into action and whether our beliefs about student-teacher relationships were supported by our actions (Hamilton, Pinnegar, Russell, Loughran & LaBoskey, 1998).

In the literature about teaching, an “explicit focus on relationships is relatively infrequent” (Lighthall, 2004, p. 206). Yet all teaching rests on relationships and how to establish and maintain classroom relationships in the best possible manner is an often taken for granted area of theoretical discussion that needs to be more clearly detailed. This successful teacher-student relationship that supports critical literacy objectives is what we term rapport. We believe that rapport is essential for all teaching, and especially for critical literacy approaches, yet theories and strategies of rapport are under developed. As many acknowledge, “the problem with rapport is that, whereas it is clearly important it is notoriously difficult to define or quantify” (Scrivener, 1994, p. 7). This paper discusses our conceptualisations of rapport, not to come up with an all encompassing definition, but to report our experiences in a way that might prompt others to re-examine their classroom atmosphere and reignite a theoretical focus on rapport.

To examine what our conceptualisations of rapport within critical literacy practices might look like, we looked at the relationships in our own classrooms. In the process of this research we positioned ourselves on a spectrum, taking up different positions at different times including that of: teacher, student, colleague, peer, supporter, advisor and critic. Rapport building is a complex phenomenon that we often undertake ‘automatically’ without critical engagement of the particular effects or reasonings. This article aims to take the reader on a narrative journey as we unpack our assumptions about what rapport is, how to establish it and what makes it successful.

## **Methodology**

Our interest in classroom relationships requires a method of research that enables study of the self as ‘text’ to critique. The method that seemed most appropriate to us is self study, described by Loughran (2004a) as the development of knowledge about oneself, teaching and learning. Self study has its roots in many transformational reforms in education including an overall move away from quantitative research towards more qualitative approaches (Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001). This is particularly suitable for educational research as “the researched and the researcher are inextricably linked” (Loughran, Hamilton, LaBoskey & Russell, 2004, p. 3). As teachers, we are both the objects and instruments of our research and therefore we need specialised techniques that enable such a study. Self study has been used for many years as a research methodology for improving teaching and generating new understandings by examination of the beliefs and actions of teachers embedded within the context of their teaching (Louie, Drevdahl, Purdy & Stackman, 2003). However it is not often linked with critical literacy, although the two share similar goals of revealing assumptions and normalised practices, and opening spaces for transformation. Self study and critical literacy both aim to provide fresh insights and alternative perspectives: “self-study in teaching and teacher education practices ... is driven by an underlying purpose that is embedded in a need to link teaching and research in meaningful ways and to view the practices associated with both from differing perspectives” (Loughran, 2004b, p. 162). Similarly, critical literacy: “enables teachers, students and communities to explore alternative ways of structuring practice around texts to address new social, economic, technological and cultural contexts” (Luke & Freebody, 1999). Therefore, self study and critical literacy have the potential to be used together to create useful insights into alternative perspectives on teaching, for a whole range of purposes.

For our first foray into this style of research we decided to work together to help each other through the self study process and to enhance our ability for openness, collaboration and reframing (Hamilton et al., 1998). We employed the techniques of mutual observation, critical discussion and reflection. We drew our findings from journal notes of classroom observations, letters of recollections, discussions of events and of our readings as well as overall reflections. For ease of sharing, transparency and recording, and as these data forms are also “the

dominant forms of self-study” (Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001, p. 13) our journals took the form of emails. These methods enabled us to become a critical friend for each other. The role of a critical friend in self study is important to provide support, objectivity, encouragement and insight (Pressick-Kilborn & te Riele, 2008), as well as to share the otherwise potentially lonely process of this style of research.

We agreed with Loughran, Berry & Corrigan (2001) that critical reflection of experiences can guide and inform the interactions of pedagogy with classroom practice and that these reflections can become a useful basis for improving professional practice. We aim to document our self study journey as we explore rapport in our teaching practice, whether the strategies we used to establish rapport were effective, and how our efforts positioned us and our students. We hope it will begin the creation of more reflection on rapport, self study and critical literacy. The following sections of the paper present our methods and reflections of exploring rapport in our classroom contexts in order to begin a more theoretical focus of rapport within critical literacy.

## **Data Collection**

As our purpose is to research rapport in our classrooms in order to argue for more of a theoretical focus of rapport within critical literacy, we were faced with an initial problem of how to collect data that related to rapport. While there is a wealth of literature connecting critical literacy and a focus on teacher talk (see for example Anstey, 2003; Edwards-Groves, 2002, 2003; Gilbert, 2003; Morgan, 1997), rapport and critical literacy theory is not so well developed. We hoped a self study project could bridge this gap. A technique suggested by Kamler and Comber (2008) is mutual observation, discussion and reflection. Together we can create new perspectives on relating relationships to teaching and critical theory. As Loughran et al. (2001) believe, it is not possible to genuinely provide insights into questions about practice if the practice situation is not seen as problematic and that such situations are able to be viewed from varying perspectives. Using the guidelines for self study (Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001) we began our research into problematising the strategies we use to build rapport, and the theoretical connections of this to critical literacy.

Mutual observation of our respective classes meant observing two very different classroom situations. Yet we saw benefit in difference because of our aim to contribute theoretically to understandings of critical literacy. As our belief is that teachers should model respect, acceptance and openness, we decided that mutual observation would suit our aim and model collegiality to our students. Building rapport requires conscious attention, time and patience, and having another teacher there to watch for rapport building successes and tensions that might otherwise escape attention was a rare opportunity. We aimed to fit into each other’s normal teaching and not alter the classroom dynamics too much. This meant that we chose to be participants in classroom activities, talking with and assisting students as appropriate, rather than remaining separate as external observers.

## **The Observation Context**

The observations occurred over several months in 2008. We introduced ourselves and our aims at the beginning of the class and then ran the class as usual. Aysha’s class was English as a Second Language, (ESL), teaching English skills in preparation for university study, mostly at Masters level, in a 10 week intensive course. There were 11 students from varying cultural backgrounds, predominantly Asian. Aysha has three years experience of teaching in this context. Claire’s teaching setting was a Bachelor of Teaching, English Literacy classroom. There

were 20 students in this setting with the majority from a singular cultural background. Therefore, the two classroom contexts were quite different.

The students were of similar ages in both groups and were highly motivated. They responded well to sharing their classroom. After each class, our observations and ideas were sent in emails to each other as a way of introducing concepts which we could discuss later in person, during weekly meetings. In this way, our collaborative self study reflections grew over time. To demonstrate, we have each chosen an example from each of our classes in which to further explore a tension of rapport. The nature of a collaborative self study means that we each saw quite different positives and negatives in each other's teaching and we both felt we had a genuine goal at stake – maximising our student's learning and our student-teacher rapport.

As this was our first attempt at a self study of this nature, we were focused on our own roles and did not involve the students in the research or ask for their reflections on rapport. This was a missed opportunity that we will be mindful to include in future self study attempts.

### **Problem: Aysha's Class**

Aysha: In my classes the students were compliant and waited to be teacher directed. They were quite reluctant to engage in active discussion or critique. I felt the class lacked a strong sense of cohesion or rapport from which to engage in risk taking or transformative thinking. The curriculum was designed from a skills perspective and the students seemed to want me to transfer my knowledge to them, rather than to engage in critical or reflective independent thinking. For example, they would continually privilege my answers in everything from vocabulary choices to short answer questions. As a native English speaker they seemed to be trying to emulate my responses rather than produce their own (in my view richer) interpretations. This was despite my efforts to praise answers that had a 'different take' to my own and my continual emphasis on developing an individual style. I felt like my aim of positioning myself alongside the students as 'collaborator in learning' was in tension with the students' positioning of me as expert.

Claire: I know how important a critical pedagogy is to Aysha's theoretical position. I could see how she attempted to introduce the students to critical ways of thinking, however the students were reluctant to engage in any kind of criticism of the texts they were reading. I do not think Aysha was explicit enough in encouraging the students to do this. The emphasis remained very skills based and very structured with little movement from the pre-determined structure.

Aysha: From discussions with Claire after her observations I can see how my role in devising goals, running activities, drawing out responses, directing discussions and giving feedback really hampered my ability to be perceived as 'collaborator' with the students. I think I also need to share control of these other aspects of learning in order to achieve the level of rapport I sought. Respect, praise and encouragement are important, but successful rapport for me now also means creating a classroom where students share in developing the classroom objectives, methods and evaluations of their own learning.

### **Problem: Claire's Class**

Claire: My problem occurred when the students were running workshops in small groups. One group taking the class consisted of two males. They were exploring assessment, including self and peer assessment through a multimedia class focusing on Lewis Carroll's poem 'Jabberwocky'. The class was fun, engaging and creative. However, the critical analysis of

assessment that I had asked for was largely absent. I praised the group highly and on reflection wondered whether I had privileged rapport building over making the shortcomings of the tutorial a teaching example for the class as a whole.

Aysha: Even though I had observed Claire before and never noted any problems of rapport, I found that on this occasion Claire was particularly effusive with her praise and it seemed to me that her efforts to position the students as responsible for the lesson actually had the reverse effect on the students, making them more resistant to accepting the structure of the tutorial. The confusion over who was 'teacher' of the class meant that there was no critique of the group running the tutorial or of assessment in general. I knew this was not Claire's intention.

Claire: At first I was doubtful of Aysha's remarks because I felt the initial success of the class, but Aysha's comments really helped me to reflect as they are a timely reminder of the tensions and conflicts that exist in our pedagogy. I now realise that I had made the very response that I planned not to do and that I had forsaken my theoretical position for the development of rapport, which turned out to be unsuccessful. My praise did not help develop the kind of rapport I desired, and I could feel an uneasy resistance. The examination of my teaching practice in order to make changes to the pedagogy has been significant to me. There was part of me which wanted to reject Aysha's comments and to convince myself that I had done the best at the time. However, after some reflection, I was able to realise that Aysha's role as a critical friend was to highlight potential points for change, not to place blame.

## **Strategies for Building Rapport**

The self study methodology we employed highlighted two particular problems of rapport in our classrooms, but it did not suggest ways to overcome these problems. We discussed the strategies we feel we use to build rapport to determine which ones we used most confidently and which ones we needed to improve. We felt this would aid understanding of the problems that emerged in our classes and might help us to resolve difficult situations in the future. As we are both teachers of adults at University, with strong interest in teaching of English in school settings as well, we wondered how theory from teaching adults might cross over to theories of teaching at any age. We have chosen some of these strategies to discuss in more detail here.

The first strategy for building rapport that we agreed was important was to recognise students' diverse and different backgrounds. This includes understanding of their culture, needs, interests, skills and personalities and requires time to get to know the students.

Claire: Some of my students have children and it is important for me to be conscious of the difference in the amount of their time, focus and energy this causes. Looking at photos and discussing children provides a useful rapport building technique, just as discussing families with children is a common way to build rapport. Discussing how young children learn has very important implications for how everybody learns. I have tensions in recognising and accepting that many students put their professional work last in their list of priorities because I expect the highest standards from them and find it difficult to accept that study is not their first priority because of family and social duties. I do not think that Aysha experiences these difficulties because her students have so much at stake and expect to have to work really hard.

Aysha: I agree, overall my students do commit thoroughly to the course, perhaps because of the short time frame or because of the high stakes. In my short courses, it is easy to not find out about family until well in to the 10 week time frame. However I disagree on the point of accepting a lower commitment because of family and social duties. I feel that life experiences add a great

deal to my students' capacity to bring their own insights and reflections to the classroom and therefore be able to challenge and transform the texts we use. I think this is a big difference between the backgrounds of my class and Claire's.

The next strategy we decided was important for overcoming problems of rapport is to remember that each student is an individual and to make time for one on one contact with each student, where possible. In large classes this can be a particular challenge.

Aysha: For me this is a simple way of remembering the first point, to treat each student on an individual basis means taking into account everything that makes them individual.

Claire: I think that in some ways it is easier for Aysha to treat her students as individuals because her classes are so small. She can talk to each student during every class. For me it is difficult to treat each student as an individual much less make a personal connection with them each class even though I recognise the importance of doing so. The larger the group becomes the more difficult it is to talk to each student in every session. I am very aware of the importance of this and yet I know that I do not always get or take the opportunity. In smaller classes it is easier to think you are addressing each student individually, but even then this is not always actually achieved.

Another strategy for building rapport is to try to indicate possible links between knowledge and life, but allow students to make their own connections. This means accepting that students will understand and use the information we teach them in different ways.

Aysha: The skills I teach for university study in Australia reflect our western culture, for example, linear, individualistic, evidence based arguments. This is often quite different for my students from other cultures and the comparison often allows them to learn a great deal about their own study culture.

Claire: I realise the challenge that Aysha has. Maybe it works well for her in that the students are so willing to please. I do not find this the case with local students. Many of them think that they should pass with out doing much work and they resist doing any reading. One of the problems I find with many pre-service students is to how to help them make connections between their own experience, knowledge of the classroom, and pedagogy. Many of them have not experienced the classroom since their student days. Their subsequent learning has been focused on their own personal, independent achievement and their thoughts about teaching which have often been influenced by media versions of teaching. They find it difficult to see the importance of collaboration and negotiation. Many find the challenge of reading daunting, thinking that teaching must be easy if only one is given the strategies to do so.

We believe that reflection is an essential tool for learning, in all contexts. So openly fostering skills of reflection are important for overcoming problems of rapport. Yet the need for reflection to connect theory and practice may not always be clear to our students, even though we feel this is a crucial aspect of reflection.

Claire: Reflection is particularly important in the Bachelor of Teaching to relate theory to practice. Recently I have been reflecting on the use of the word 'theory' and wonder if it is the best word to use. The popular press often reports that experience of the classroom is more important than theory. Yet we would not accept that our doctors and lawyers have no knowledge of their field except for direct experience. We mainly use reading, writing, discussion and reflective journals to help students critically reflect, but I think my demonstration of mutual collaboration with Aysha

highlighted the need for ongoing professional learning and modeled critical reflection done in a different way.

Aysha: I think theory is crucial to the professional development of teachers, particularly teachers in training as it provides insights into experience that would otherwise never be achieved. I hope our work modeled a way to combine theory and practice, although I am not sure how successful it was for Claire's students as I think they resisted making the connection between us and their future professional careers.

Claire: As we want critically informed teachers who are able to make decisions based on knowledge of theory and practice I agree that it is not good enough to try to disguise the importance of theory. In fact it has been through this critical self study that I have become even more determined to encourage students to make theory an important part of praxis.

Another strategy we decided could encourage rapport is to consider levels of inclusivity – race, gender, class – of subject material and context in the classroom (Rowan, 2001). We believe this can be achieved through engaging students in discussions about equity whenever possible, although it can be difficult to achieve the high level critique of social structures that can be required.

Aysha: Much of my material concerns white American theory linked to different cultures. It is useful to compare this with students' own opinions and experiences. Sometimes the texts are biased or even incorrect but this is useful for me to show that texts are constructs and need to be critiqued. Once the students see this they are far more likely to feel able to criticise or disagree with an author's argument.

Claire: I know that I try to help the students to critically reflect on issues like inclusivity. Aysha has much more of a struggle. My class had one very successful session doing this, but I do not think that we spent enough time to make it meaningful. The pre-service teachers are still at the stage where teaching is about their actions and not about the students and what they might actually learn.

An important aspect of critical literacy is making power relationships in knowledge construction explicit, including the knowledge construction of texts (Rowan, 2001). We believe this aspect to also be important for establishing rapport.

Aysha: I try to make explicit the western knowledge constructions that are validated in the sorts of texts my course uses, especially as they are relatively unfamiliar to my students. I aim to teach the students to interrogate these assumptions and to find alternatives more fitting with their own cultures.

Claire: I noticed the effort that Aysha made to show how western knowledge is constructed but the students had great difficulty in understanding this notion and although encouraged to give their own opinions, they were mostly silent. In my class I tried very hard to provide the opportunity for the students to examine the nature of knowledge and its constructedness, but in the end I think that my group of students remained very much of the view that any knowledge is knowledge and the purpose of teaching English is for the students to have fun. It did not have the opportunity to become the kind of transformative critical literacy class I might have hoped for.

Aysha: I agree. I too feel I missed an opportunity for more transformation, because although I take great pains to show how western knowledge is only one type of knowledge – which the

students are evidence of! – they still privilege the western style because they have chosen to come to a western country for further study and because they know it will earn good marks. However, I always feel disappointed that from such rich cultural diversity I end up endorsing only one way of being and thinking and one (academic) value system.

Making power relationships between teacher and student explicit is one way in which critical literacy can help to promote rapport. It is also a way in which critical literacy cannot work without a certain level of rapport, because power in the classroom cannot be shared, and an effective learning environment maintained, unless there is sufficient rapport between teacher and students.

Aysha: Having Claire come to observe my classes I tried to emphasise that I was still learning and therefore build common ground with my students. This is also easier because my students are adults and have a different perspective on life-long learning, but Claire also made me realise this is an area I still need to improve.

Claire: I hoped that having Aysha come to my classes would help break down the power relations that the students had constructed between us. I think that it did at the beginning, but I wonder if the students soon reconstructed Aysha as teacher and then resisted the authority of the role they constructed. Aysha and I have a very trusting relationship and this involves the capacity to be honest with each other. This helped a great deal in our self study project. We realised that we needed to clarify for ourselves some of the characteristics which we thought would help us to establish rapport. We came up with the following:

- Build openness and democracy
- Share authority and responsibility for learning
- Promote points of commonality
- Provide variety in each lesson, to suit different learning styles
- Be aware of the effects of context (what is happening outside the class)
- Be aware of the links between self esteem and learning and help learners respond positively and constructively to mistakes and those of others
- Use body language that is open, relaxed, interested, approachable and reassuring (i.e. eye contact, smiling, appropriate gestures etc.)
- Be available to talk with students outside of class times and make an effort to get to know them, as individuals, as much as possible.

There may be other points to add to this list and we would welcome others' reflections on establishing rapport. In thinking about rapport building techniques, we noticed that theory crosses over easily between adults and children and that being acutely aware of the processes that we use to develop relationships is at the core of implementing each strategy. We also believe that self studies are most helpful in problematising our implementation of these strategies in order to evaluate their success and that collaboration with a critical friend is a key part of making this process both possible and rewarding.

A challenge we encountered, which made it very difficult to implement the kinds of strategies for rapport we wanted, was a kind of student resistance to inclusion, which was perhaps not intentional. The students positioned us as 'teacher' – as an expert in control of the knowledge. As the teacher, we had responsibility for the learning, so the fault lay with us if the learning was not successful. The students resisted us trying to share power, because with power comes responsibility. Therefore, we now consider an understanding of positions of power and resistance central aspects for understanding rapport.

## Resistance

Aysha's students seemed compliant on the surface which created a form of resistance because she was trying to develop their independent critical skills. On the other hand Claire's students were resistant to confronting their assumptions of how students learn. Disconnects between pedagogical intentions and outcomes can occur in many ways and the reasons are often hard to see. However, critical reflection and self study enable problems to be examined and learned from. Self study brought to light unique insights into our classrooms and our supportive relationship enabled us to highlight for each other where possibilities for transforming these might occur.

From our attempt at self study research we were reminded of how much people and personalities vary and how differences and occasional clashes are inevitable. We have come to further understand that personality is only one aspect of developing rapport and multiple strategies and theoretical understandings of rapport are necessary. We have had renewed experience of the challenge of teaching and continue to embrace working with a variety of people. We also have an exciting new research methodology to continue to learn about and practice.

Classroom rapport is not based on like, but respect and acceptance. This means expecting and accepting differences and finding common ground to maintain "unconditional positive regard" (Cowan, 2006, p. 200). As LoBianco, Liddicoat and Crozet (1999) encourage in cross cultural communication, rapport in challenging circumstances needs to find a 'third place' outside of comfort zones, which accepts strangeness and misunderstanding as normal on the way to finding points of connection and a common perspective. In some classes rapport building techniques will need to be explicitly taught, in others only encouraged because rapport is the unpredictable result of the different mix of personalities, needs and behaviours created in each new class.

As Aronowitz and Giroux (1991) bring to light, the term 'students' creates an impression of a homogenous group. Obviously this is not the case. Every student will not respond to particular rapport building strategies in the same way. Resistance to rapport is normal and positive as it forces teachers to think creatively about new ways to create connections. Resistance can also come from the teacher if the teacher resists the position the students demand, or simply if there are personality clashes. In this situation critical reflection and honesty is essential. Self study, particularly in a collaborative way, is also a useful way to explore personal forms of resistance.

Resistance can be a way to open up new ways of thinking and being and prove fertile ground for building lasting connections and transformations: "students' resistance can reshape school knowledge and social relations" (Luke, 1997, p. 7). In our self study experience, we have further cemented our belief in the connection between relationships and critical theory and transformed our understanding of how we establish rapport. Although it can be challenging to create rapport in some circumstances, it is essential if we are to achieve meaningful teaching.

Relationships in the classroom involve complex, dynamic processes of rapport, learning and power which are never fixed or unidirectional. All school work requires learning about the appropriate forms of language and behaviour which are inherently linked to social considerations of class, gender, race, age, status and location. Getting 'school' right, in terms of what, when and even how to speak in line with these social constructions "is not just a matter of being able to converse competently, but a matter of becoming competent in the terms that each teacher designates as competent" (Davies, 1993, p. 39). This is socially and culturally dependent, but

often normalised, invisible and 'obvious', which makes it "difficult for both teachers and students to interrupt it" (Davies, 1993, p. 40). Teachers who advocate critical literacy need to apply critical theory to both the activities and the practice of teaching. If teachers are able to make explicit the constructed world that is their classroom, they can open the production of 'the rules' for everyone to contribute to. These rules include the conventions and styles of student-teacher interactions. Student teacher interactions have to change to successfully implement critical pedagogies, because critical pedagogies aim to share power in a way different from the traditional student teacher roles. If teachers can learn to see the relationships they foster in the classroom they can become aware of how these position power and authority. Self study and reflection are steps towards understanding practices of student-teacher interactions and moving towards change.

Teachers in adult education accept that they do not know everything their students know, and adult students accept that teachers are not perfect sources of knowledge. They need to choose to work together to extend each others' knowledge. This choice necessitates a level of acceptance of each other and therefore a level of rapport. The same can also be said for teachers of adolescents and children. All learners need to take an active role in learning if it is to be meaningful. While traditional classrooms offer few choices in what can be learned and how it can be learned (Fairclough, 1992), choice can be made available in relationship interactions and learning styles. To enable real choice and agency for students, the teacher needs to be open to multiple ideas. If more answers than just the ones the teacher has in mind are accepted, students are empowered as real participants in the classroom (Freebody, Ludwig & Gunn, 1995). Similarly, the teacher becomes able to participate in the role of learner as well. Everyone can share authority and power and can critique others' viewpoints.

We believe self study is a key process by which critical literacy is able to examine the content and processes of learning as well as the relationships that support learning. If classroom relationships are made problematic through a critical self study, it becomes possible to see the relationships that are present in all of teaching in a new light and by using reflection, reframe events to create new understandings (Hamilton et al., 1998; Kosnik, Beck, Freese & Samaras, 2004).

Reflection is by nature an ongoing and often a solitary pursuit, but as we have found, reflection can be enhanced and made more dynamic with mutual collaboration, discussion and collegial support. Self study of the style presented here can lead to professional development and personal insight because personal narratives "can and should be used to improve teaching" (Jalongo & Isenberg, 1995, p. xxv).

## **Final Thoughts**

We believe critical literacy can achieve transformations of students' and teachers' ideas and lives by opening up assumptions to critique and change. This cannot occur just with the teacher's intentions, the student must take part in the process and therefore rapport is essential. Opening up our assumptions about rapport means problematising the rapport building techniques we use in classrooms and how these relate to our teaching theories.

This article offers an exploration of two teachers' classrooms through narrative, reflections and theoretical wonderings, as we scrutinise our professional practice and challenge each other to see things from a new perspective. In particular, it has questioned the theory-praxis nexus of rapport and rapport building strategies within a critical literacy. Our first attempt at self study has only partly answered our questions about understanding the theory of relationships and critical

pedagogies as well as how rapport is best achieved in the classroom, and there is still much to do in terms of realising the potential of rapport in successful critical pedagogies. We hope others will continue as we will, to engage theoretically with the role of relationships in critical theory, by working together to study the self as teacher and by strengthening the supportive, reflective and ultimately transformative relationships teachers, teachers-in-training and students need so much in these times of change.

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