Teaching for Diversity, Inclusion and Equity: Developing Class Participation Guidelines

How will we make our classrooms safe and supportive learning communities? How are we going to work together? How do we want to be together?

Framing the Development of Class Participation Guidelines

Inclusive teaching requires that we spend some time on developing a classroom culture in which all students feel safe, supported, and encouraged to express their thoughts, values, and perspectives. It is important to clearly communicate what assumptions and values frame and guide your course. This helps students to know what to expect and reduces unnecessary conflicts. Establishing clear expectations and norms for classroom interactions by providing or co-creating participation guidelines with your students from the start of class, provides a solid foundation for all following work. Discussion guidelines – also referred to as discussion guidelines, class participation agreements, communication guidelines, classroom norms, codes of conduct, or agreements for civil discourse – make explicit the kind of interactions that will be valued and encouraged.

Developing Class Participation Guidelines

You can develop the class participation guidelines on your own and place them in your syllabus or on a handout that you give to your students early in the term. However, experience suggests that it is more effective to engage students in creating their own classroom rules. Involving your students in identifying what would help them participate fully in class activities, establishes inclusion from the beginning of a class. The class participation agreements remind students of what they expect from themselves and each other. In cases of conflict, the class can refer back to the guidelines as part of the conflict resolution. Once guidelines are established, each member of the classroom community has a responsibility for adhering to them. In addition, the exercise of developing the classroom rules can serve as an ice-breaker and a trust builder that helps to establish a learning community.

The first class meeting is a prime opportunity to do engage your students with a class participation guidelines exercise, but you can still do this later in the semester when appropriate. It is a basic technique that can be accomplished as a small-group activity or brainstormed as a whole-group activity.

Small-Group Process:

- Divide the larger group into smaller sub-groups of three to five individuals.
- Ask each group to make a short list of those ways of interacting and communicating that are desirable and undesirable in this classroom. Give the groups about five minutes to make their lists.
- Bring everyone back together and invite the groups to share their lists.
- Clarify what is meant by specific behaviors and give concrete examples (e.g. How do we define confidentiality, respect, active listening?).
- Achieve consensus: Combine similar items to create a list in each category that the class can agree on. Save these and display or refer to them regularly throughout the semester.
- Discuss with students how they want to handle it if class members violate the established rules.
Suggestions for Class Participation Guidelines

The following participation norms provide some suggestions that have been proven to be successful in providing a framework for critical discourse by creating a productive space for difficult conversations.

- We will be respectful of all members of the classroom community.
- Confidentiality.
- We will say each other’s proper names and preferred pronouns whenever possibly.
- Respecting multiple perspectives: We will listen respectfully to each other even if we don’t have the same opinions, experiences, or feelings. Agree to Disagree.
- We will listen attentively and actively. We will listen respectfully and with empathy.
- Speaking from our own experiences: We will avoid generalizations. We will use “I” statements.
- Differences are to be valued and honored.
- We will challenge the idea not the person.
- We will check our assumptions about fellow members of the class and suspend judgment.
- No blaming or scapegoating.
- We will not use put-downs, even for comic relief.
- We will practice dialogue instead of criticizing each other or trying to persuade each other.
- Taking responsibility: If conflicts arise, we will take a problem-solving approach.
- ‘Ouch’: we will name it if a comment hurts or offends us and seek clarification.
- One mic: One person speaks at a time. Don’t interrupt each other.
- Step Forward/Step Back. Share airtime. If you haven’t participated in a while, please step forward; if you have been participating a lot, take a step back. Give space before you take space. After you speak once, do not speak again until others have spoken.
- We will acknowledge that stereotypes, bias, discrimination, and oppression based on race/ethnicity, social class, gender, sexuality, etc. exist and actively try to combat them.

Please note that this list can and should be adapted to reflect the specific needs of your class.

Should difficult moments arise in your classroom, you can refer to the established classroom rules for reference.

For further teaching resources related to diversity and teaching, please go to [http://www.umass.edu/ctfd/teaching/tips.shtml](http://www.umass.edu/ctfd/teaching/tips.shtml)

Based on the following works:


