Developing Class Norms and Participation Guidelines

How will we create inclusive, safe and supportive learning communities in our classes? How are we going to work together? How do we want to be together?

Framing the Development of Class Participation Guidelines
Teaching inclusively requires that we spend time on developing a class culture in which all students feel safe, supported, and encouraged to express their thoughts, values, experiences, and perspectives.

It is important to clearly communicate what 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 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 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.

“Developing Class Norms and Participation Guidelines” Kirsten Helmer, Ed. D., Institute for Teaching Excellence & Faculty Development, University of Massachusetts Amherst http://www.umass.edu/tefd/
Suggestions for Class Norms or Participation Guidelines

- Be respectful of all members of the classroom community.
- Confidentiality. Personal stories that we share in this room, stay in the room.
- Address each other with proper names and pronouns.
- Embrace multiple perspectives and a diversity of voices.
- Speak from our own experiences. Avoid generalizations. Make comments using “I” statements.
- One mic: One person speaks at a time. Avoid interrupting and talking over others.
- Share talking time. Step Forward/Step Back.
- Listen actively and with the intention to understand. Acknowledge what another person has said. Paraphrase what has been said. Ask clarifying questions.
- Challenge ideas and arguments not people.
- Check your assumptions about fellow members of the class. Refrain from judging and labeling.
- If someone says something that hurts or offends you, name it (e.g., say ‘ouch’) without attacking the person. Acknowledge that the comment—not the person—hurt your feelings and explain why.
- Use appropriate language. No put-downs, even for comic relief.
- Agree to practice dialogue instead of criticizing each other or trying to persuade each other.
- Agree to take a problem-solving approach when conflicts arise.
- Write down thoughts or questions if there is no time or you don’t feel safe to voice them during the discussion. Ask the instructor to help you find a way to share your thought or question.
- Acknowledge that stereotypes, bias, discrimination, and oppression based on race/ethnicity, social class, gender, sexuality, etc. exist and that we will actively try to combat them.

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

Adapted from:


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