Developing Class Participation Agreements

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 Agreements
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 agreements for classroom interactions provides a solid foundation for all following work. Class participation agreements – also referred to as class norms or netiquette (in the online environment) – make explicit the kind of interactions that contribute to productive learning.

Developing Class Participation Agreements
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 agreements. Involving your students in identifying what would help them participate fully in class, allows students to take ownership of these agreements.

The class participation agreements also lay out for students what they expect from themselves and each other. In cases of conflict, the class can refer back to the agreements as part of conflict resolution. Once agreements are established, each member of the class is responsible and accountable for living into them.

Engaging students in the exercise of developing the class agreements also serves as an ice-breaker and a trust builder that helps to cultivate a learning community.

Consider using a class session during the first couple of weeks of the semester to collaboratively develop the class agreements. Depending on class size you can do this with the whole class or using a small group process.

Small-Group Process:
- Divide students into groups of 3-4.
- Ask each group to make a short list of those ways of interacting and communicating that are desirable 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.

In the online environment, you could either place students in Zoom breakout rooms and ask them to note their ideas in a collaborative online document. Or, you can turn this into an asynchronous learning activity using an online discussion forum.
Sample Class Participation Agreements

- Give respect and dignity to all members of the classroom community.
- Confidentiality. Personal stories that we share, stay in the room.
- Address each other with proper names and pronouns.
- Be brave, take risks and lean into discomfort.
- Speak in a way that’s kind, honest, and helpful.
- Use appropriate language. No put-downs, even for comic relief.
- Come from curiosity and generosity not judgment.
- Embrace multiple perspectives and a diversity of voices.
- Speak from your own experiences using “I” statements. Avoid generalizations.
- Share talking time. Step Forward/Step Back.
- One mic: One person speaks at a time. Avoid interrupting and talking over others.
- Listen actively and with the intention to understand. Acknowledge what another person has said. Paraphrase what has been said. Ask clarifying questions.
- Stay engaged when listening.
- Challenge ideas and arguments not people.
- 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.
- Agree to practice dialogue instead of criticizing 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.
- Check your assumptions about fellow members of the class. Refrain from judging and labeling.

Consider including a few agreements about what students can expect from you.

Adapt this list should to reflect the specific needs of your class.

Using the Class Participation Agreements

- Post the list on your course website.
- Make it living document and ask students to add to it throughout the semester
- Periodically ask students to reflect on how the class is doing with their agreements, which ones are working well and which ones the class needs to improve on.
- Should difficult moments arise in your class, refer to the established classroom agreements for reference and ask students to identify what actions contributed to the conflict.

Adapted from: