

Creating Community Agreements

One principle that's worth considering every time you go to teach is, "Every class should be about the class." What this means is that the relationships between students -- and between yourself and students -- often end up being more important to the success of the class than the material you're teaching. If you want to create a classroom community, you can use the first part of the semester to create a set of "community agreements" with your students. Community agreements are one approach to creating and maintaining community throughout the semester; they offer an effective method for building a sense of mutuality, trust, and shared commitments between students.

Creating Community Agreements: A rough guide

Everyone needs to genuinely agree to classroom norms in order for them to lay the ground for trust to be established within the class. It's worth taking an entire period of class, or portions of multiple meetings, to establish consensus with your students about how you all will relate to one another. Below is a rough guide to creating community agreements.

How to make a set of community agreements:

1. Explain the purpose of the community agreement - why are we doing this?
2. Give everyone time to reflect on what they need (freewrite, Think-Pair-Share)*
3. Give everyone a chance to share with the entire class - and ask follow up questions (for instance, What does "respect" look like?). Write the agreements down.
4. Let students raise concerns. We're making a commitment to each other!
5. Type up the agreement and distribute it to students.

*Some questions you can ask students to freewrite around for step 2:

- What are your hopes and fears for this class?
- Is there anything that the instructor or classmates can do that would help make this class work well for you? Aka, what do you need from others in order for you to participate effectively and succeed in this class?

Here are some excellent resources that can help you structure your approach to creating your community agreements with your class:

Seeds for Change, "[Group Agreements](#)"

University of Toronto, "[Community Agreements](#)"

Barnard, "[Crafting Community Agreements](#)"

Reflective Exercise: Preparing to build a classroom community

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The following reflective exercise will help you prepare to co-create community agreements with your class. Use this as a freewriting exercise! Respond to each question for five minutes, writing the entire time - no matter how half-formed, sloppy, unsure, hesitant, exuberant, or chaotic the thoughts are! This is simply an exercise to help you clarify your thinking to yourself so when you create your community agreements with your students, you'll be ready. We're going by the old adage, "Plan like heck so you can go with the flow!"

1. Why do you want to co-create community agreements with your students? Explain your thinking to yourself, and then think about how you want to explain your desire for community agreements with your students.
2. What are your hopes and fears for this class?
3. What do you need from your students to help you succeed as their teacher? How do you want to articulate your expectations to the students?
4. What is a classroom norm or community agreement you would like to propose?
5. What are some constraints of your course that have to be worked with or through in your construction of community agreements? For example, how do you cultivate trust between yourself and students when you, as the instructor, must ultimately give them a grade and thus have a kind of material power over them?
6. What does your ideal classroom look like and feel like?

Navigating Conflict

Having a strong sense of community (trust between each other) is a key foundation to navigating conflict in the classroom. However, building community isn't simply instrumental, conflict, discomfort, disagreement -- these are all inevitable and necessary feelings in the struggle and joy that is learning. Learning and unlearning are challenging processes and conflict is okay; our responsibility as teachers is not to avoid conflict and act as if the best kind of class is one where everyone pretends they think or feel the same way. It's vital that we are able to construct a space where we can have dialogue across differences.

The following can be one of the most challenging - and necessary - questions for students to work through together in-class: How do we want to deal with conflict? Therefore, we highly recommend you make this question an essential part of your classroom agreements. Before you can ask students this question, you must ask it of yourself. So, take ten minutes and freewrite through this question - How do you want to deal with conflict in your classroom?

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Here are some excellent tips from former TLC Post-doctoral Fellow Asilia Franklin-Phipps for navigating difficult conversations in the classroom. Here are some of the questions she uses to facilitate tense but important conversations:

What did you feel when reading this article? Why do you think you felt that way?

What were some of the words or phrases that you had a reaction to? Why do you imagine that you reacted in that way?

What claims did the author make that countered or challenged your thinking or perspective on this issue?

How does this make you think about X differently? What are the implications of that different thinking?

What claims do you disagree with, are unconvinced of, or have an embodied response to?

Practically speaking, if students are worried about saying the wrong thing or being judged by their peers you can invite students to write anonymous responses on notecards. You can shuffle the cards and pass them back out and then take turns reading the cards aloud. You can then ask if anyone else has a response to the statement just read.

You can read more about the usefulness of conflict - and how to work with it - here:

Asilia Franklin-Phipps, "[Tense but Productive Discussions](#)"

bell hooks, "[Conflict](#)," from *Teaching Critical Thinking: Practical Wisdom*