Community Agreements in Your Classroom

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"Creating community commitments is something we can all do in our classrooms, and other educative spaces, to construct an environment that promotes engaged, interactive learning, enriching students' learning experience" (Bettez, 2020)

Community agreements are norms shared between members of a group on how the group will work together by encouraging collaboration and growth. Designed to build a sense of community, the agreements center shared goals and values to set boundaries for the space, establish clear expectations, and meet the diverse needs of its members. For these reasons, community agreements are living documents. Although they are most often established at the beginning of the semester, they can be collectively edited and updated at any time to adapt to changing social interactions. In her *Inside Higher Ed* article titled "[Creating Classroom Community Agreements](#)", Jesica Siham Fernandez maintains that community agreements pave the way for creating a critically compassionate learning community, which is "an inclusive, affirming and humanizing classroom experience."

You might want to create a community agreement for the following reasons:
- To increase mutual trust, problem solving, and self-reliance. Compared to top-down classroom rules approaches, community agreements are co-created.
- To provide a tool for accountability for the entire class, including the instructor. They can especially be important when discussing controversial or challenging topics. Conflict management plans can be incorporated to fall back on when group expectations are not met. However, community agreements are not a policing mechanism

Take a moment to consider the expectations and boundaries that might be included in a community agreement. The following are among those suggested by [Boston University's CTL](#).

- Respect for accessibility needs (for example scent-free/peanut-free environment)
- I will respect the speaker, even when I do not agree with the point the speaker is making
- I will assume good intentions from others but acknowledge if I am feeling hurt by the information and/or the way it is shared

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- I will listen carefully and try not to interrupt—even when I am excited to respond!
- I will try not to generalize about groups (even groups with which I identify) and I won't ask another person to speak as a representative of a group.
- I will keep an open mind and look forward to learning about–and being challenged by–ideas, questions, and points of view that are different than my own.

Developing Community Agreements

There are multiple approaches to creating a community agreement. It is important to remember that community agreements are established to facilitate discussion. They are different from course policies (course requirements, expectations, and procedures). It is recommended that you state their purpose and clearly distinguish between course policies and community agreements when introducing them.

Some suggested approaches to creating community agreements are:
- Project Nia's Agency, Boundaries, and Credibility (ABCs) Framework
- Small Group Method
- Brookfield and Preskill's Method
- Acronym Method

Despite the different names, the approaches are similar. This resource focuses on Project Nia's ABC framework, which is remixed below:

Agency

Reflects on the opportunity for each leaner to add their voice to the agreement. For small class sizes, the Center for Teaching and Learning at Washington University in St. Louis suggests an informal process to facilitate participation in co-creating the rules by students when class size is 35 students or less. This could simply be achieved by inviting students using statements such as "*In this course, I'd like our discussions to be informed, respectful, thoughtful, and engaged. What are the ground rules we should follow to make this happen?*". The Centre for Teaching Support and Innovation at University of Toronto suggests using think-pair-share or individual writing prompts as active learning strategies to brainstorm ideas. For large lecture courses, students can be invited to add to already identified agreements at their own time. Students will feel empowered, not forced to accept the agreement and will have more buy-in when made part of the process. This guide from Barnard College's Center for Engaged Pedagogy provides models and recommendations for

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using online applications such as Jamboard or Padlet to craft Community Agreements.

Boundaries

Community Agreements allow the group to build a set of expectations, to respect the boundaries, and hold each other accountable. Below are some examples of boundaries to consider including in a community agreement adapted from Boston University's CTL.

- I will try to be aware of my own strengths and weaknesses: if I am someone who loves to verbally contribute, I will make space for others to share their views. If I am often silent, I will challenge myself to contribute a question or comment.
- I will aim to allow everyone, including myself, the opportunity to revise and clarify ideas and positions in response to new information and insights.
- I will support my points with evidence and will be honest when my thoughts about a topic are still speculative or exploratory.
- I will try not to make assumptions and will ask questions to learn more about other perspectives, especially those that are different from my own.
- I will maintain confidentiality as I understand that the specifics of stories shared by other students are for classroom discussion only

Credibility

- Refers to valuing and respecting the credible knowledge of all members of the classroom. It involves promoting cultural competence, reflecting relational values, and engaging in collective learning. This Sample Group Contract from University of Waterloo breaks down group behaviors into temporal, procedural, and behavioral.

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