Developing Community Agreements

How will we create supportive, open, productive, and trusting learning communities?

How are we going to work together?

Framing the Development of Community Agreements

Teaching inclusively requires that we spend time developing a class culture in which all students (and instructors!) feel supported, open, productive, and trusting, and are encouraged to engage meaningfully with their learning experiences.

Community agreements are statements that guide how members of a classroom community (students, instructors, teaching assistants) aspire to work *with* each other, and how the group itself holds members accountable. These are distinct from classroom norms (how we currently act) or rules (mandated and/or enforced externally). Community agreements are a collective vision for a learning community, and they help all members of the community be accountable for their contribution to the productive dynamics of the class. When tough moments arise, community agreements provide instructors and students alike with a framework to initiate conversations with, or respond to questions from, about any behavior that disrupts the community agreement(s).

These agreements should emerge from a process implemented at the beginning of a term. Once developed, a list of community agreements is a living document that you can use, revisit, and revise throughout the term.

How do I create a community agreement?

Community agreements may be created in different ways depending on the style and size of the class. For example, instructors with large lecture-based classes may choose to develop agreements in a different way from instructors with small discussion-based classes. Here are some key points to keep in mind as you plan for developing community agreements:

- Explain the role of a community agreement within the learning environment; this may include general principles such as an inclusive learning environment as well as specific goals such how to handle breaks. Be sure to prompt students to comment on how they'd like to handle tough conversations or interactions that make us uncomfortable.

- Ask students to reflect individually on a time when they were part of a learning community that was supportive, open, productive, and trusting. What were the hallmarks of that learning community? What did they get from their instructors? What did they experience with peers in group work? How were discussions handled?
- Have students discuss in small groups (2-4) and come up with 3-5 agreements. Surface these to the entire class to combine and come to consensus. This can be done in person or online.
- You can either determine the feasibility of the proposed agreements in the moment or take the agreements with you and let the class know that you'll review them and report back on which ones it will be possible to adopt. If the class surfaces a suggestion that's not possible (e.g. "all grading is done in 24 hours" or "no one says anything offensive"), it's your opportunity to model productive dialogue and propose alternatives (e.g. "My teaching schedule won't make it possible for me to complete grading with 24 hours, but I can provide feedback on all major assignments within a week of their due date." or "While it's valuable for us to try not to make offensive statements in class, our diverse backgrounds and life experiences mean that one of us may inadvertently say something that offends someone else. When that happens, how do we want to handle that as a learning community? What would provide the greatest benefit to expanding our understanding about X topic?")
- Post the agreement to a physical and/or virtual space where all class participants can view it.
- Use the agreements regularly throughout the semester to maintain and build an inclusive learning environment. If needed, revisit and revise something that needs clarification.
- Provide students with a way to discuss uncomfortable or distressing moments with you so that any difficulties are addressed in a timely and appropriate way. Should difficult moments arise in your class, refer to the established community agreements for reference and ask students to identify if the group has deviated from your agreements in some way or if there was an unforeseen gap in your agreements that could have facilitated a more productive conversation.

Some alternative possibilities for developing the agreements:

- Create a list of suggestions that students vote on (electronically or through hard copy check lists) to highlight the behaviors and attitudes they feel are most

important for the success of their learning environment. They could edit or refine these before coming to consensus on the final list.

- Ask students to reflect, individually and then in small groups, on the characteristics of positive learning experiences and contrast these with negative experiences. From these reflections, the class may develop a list of behaviors to frame their interactions.
- Provide electronic options through an online survey or discussion board for students to express agreement or disagreement with the principles before developing the final community agreement through.

Sample Community Agreements

- Confidentiality. Our learning should leave the room, but personal stories that we share will stay in the room.
- Address each other with proper names and pronouns.
- Instructors will provide feedback on assignments in a timely fashion so students can use that feedback to better prepare for the next assignment.
- Step up and step back. Be generous enough to share your ideas with the class, and be mindful enough to share talking time and be aware of how much time you are taking when you speak
- Listen actively and with the intention to understand. Acknowledge what another person has said. Paraphrase what has been said. Ask clarifying questions.
- 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.
- This is a long class, so we'll always take a short break around the halfway point.
- Flexibility is a value of our learning community. It's ok to ask the instructor for an extension beyond what's spelled out in the syllabus if you have a plan for staying on track with your learning.

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

Adapted from:

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Teaching@UW. "Developing Community Agreements," n.d. https://teaching.washington.edu/course-design/developing-community-agreements/.