Creating Community Through Co-Constructing Expectations in Graduate Coursework

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Abstract: Many of the interpersonal issues that arise during a graduate-level course are the result of a mismatch in the expectations instructors and students have for one another. As part of an effort to intentionally build community and avoid these issues, I lead an exercise on the first day of every class I teach to co-construct the norms that dictate how the course is conducted. The activity helps to establish a common understanding of expectations for each member of the learning community and gives students a voice in the learning process on the very first day of class. This activity may also hold value in establishing expectations in undergraduate coursework.

Keywords: college teaching; graduate coursework; expectations; norms; learning community

Ample research has explored creating positive learning environments in college courses (e.g., Lang, 2010); however, much of this work has been conducted at the undergraduate level. Studies have found that when class activities are student-centered, students have increased levels of motivation, participation, and achievement (Frisby & Martin, 2010; Nilson, 2016). At the same time, student stress, uncertainty, and amotivation have been linked to reduced academic satisfaction (Yoo & Marshall, 2022). Throughout my experience in higher education, I have observed that most conflicts arise due to a mismatch in expectations between the instructor and students or between students. To remedy this, I lead an exercise on the first day of every class I teach to co-construct the norms that dictate how the course is run.

First, I ask students to take three minutes to independently draft three sets of expectations: (a) expectations of me as their instructor; (b) expectations I should have of them as students; and (c) expectations we should all have for one another. Students then organize into groups of three or four to discuss their responses and create a single list of expectations, while I label three columns on the classroom white boards: *Instructor*, *Students*, and *Everyone*. I invite each group to send a representative to write their groups' expectations on the white board. This could also be accomplished by using a digital application. We then discuss each response as a class.

The discussion begins with what they expect of me. If there is any ambiguity regarding what is written on the board, I ask for the author to explain. Two common items requiring clarification are: (a) grade assignments in a timely manner and (b) respond to email – both of which require agreed upon metrics. The discussion around each item often centers around providing clarity and transparency as much as anything else. For some items, there is more room for negotiation than others. For example, I typically state that I will grade assignments by the next class meeting (which is usually seven days in my graduate classes that meet once per week). Students could request to have assignments graded by the day before class so that they have time to digest the feedback before class, which I would be amenable to. For

assignments that take longer to grade, this is a good time to share that. For example, in an introductory research methods course, I explain that I might take a few additional days to grade their research proposals since I am often grading 40 students' 20+ page papers. Setting this expectation on the first day has led to me receiving few complaints when I inevitably take longer to return this assignment. I also typically state that I will respond to email within 48 hours, excluding weekends, noting that I often reply much sooner. However, this is not a proclamation, but rather a suggestion open for discussion. Again, I have found that setting this expectation up front leads to fewer complaints later in the semester when I have not responded within a few hours. Another common expectation listed for the instructor is to give clear expectations for assignments. This is a fair request; however, I always counter by insisting that a corresponding expectation be made of students – to let the instructor know when expectations are unclear. One cannot address problems one does not know exist.

Through this process, students recognize that the bulk of the expectations that students identify for one constituency are expectations that we should all have for one another. For example, students often list "respect our time" as an expectation of the instructor. I ask if that is also an expectation I should have of them. They respond in the affirmative, and we move that item to the third column – expectations we should have for everyone. The most common expectation students have of their peers is to give a full and complete effort. Common expectations students have identified for everyone include: (a) provide clear communication; (b) put effort into the feedback you give one another; (c) be respectful; (d) learn from one another; (e) assume positive intent in one another during class discussions; (f) be flexible; and in the age of COVID-19, (g) stay home if you are not feeling well. We also discuss the responsible use of mobile devices for non-class purposes. While some professors insist on an outright ban, I err on the side of limited use for personal matters such as a child who texts their parent to let them know they have arrived home safely. Whatever the negotiated boundaries for technology are, it is better that they are discussed up front, before an issue emerges that causes frustration with a student who did not know the rules. At the conclusion of the activity, the three lists of norms are posted to the course learning management system site (e.g., Canvas), as a reminder for the community. I typically give a midterm evaluation in my courses, and that is a good time to revisit the class norms as well.

This activity lasts between 30 and 60 minutes; however, I have found it to be time well spent that accomplishes three goals. First, it creates an expectation that students will contribute their ideas with one another and the class on the very first day. It also encourages interaction which can be especially helpful for students who are new to campus; at the end of class, they know at least a handful of their peers better than they did previously. Second, the activity is preventative. Creating a common understanding of expectations for everyone solves many problems before they arise. Finally, students have shared with me that the exercise signaled to them that their voices mattered in my class, which has been found to create a positive feedback loop – encouraging student engagement and enhancing rapport with the instructor (Nilson, 2016). Co-creating norms for the learning community is a good way to let students know you are invested in them as learners, create an active learning environment, and avoid issues that might arise later in the semester. While the activity described here was conducted in graduate-level courses, it could have value in undergraduate settings as well – especially for first-year courses where students are just becoming familiar with college expectations.

References

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