

Special issue: Innovative Teaching Personal Essays

## Classroom norms: A strategy to connect with students

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When the new generation of students, born 1995-2010, according to Seemiller and Grace (2016), first entered college, I (Teresa) faced a challenge that I had never experienced before; the way I had always interacted with students did not seem to reach this group as it had previously. I felt that I had to do something different. As a professor of foreign language and a native of one culture living in another, I have always been aware of cultural differences and interested in learning how best to support students. With that in mind, I joined the Cultural Diversity Faculty Learning Community (CD-FLC) at my college. During one of the meetings, I brought up the problems I was experiencing. One of the co-facilitators of the CD-FLC, Dr. Ruth Benander, completely changed my perspective of this new generation of students when she described them as being from another culture. I had been viewing my students as lacking some of the basic skills to interact in a college classroom. However, when I saw them as coming from another culture, I realized they were just using a code that I did not know. With this new perspective in mind, I had a conversation with my co-author, Angie, to explore strategies I could use in my class, so that the students and I could have an understanding of how to interact with one another.

Angie: When Teresa shared the issues she had in class, I thought of the “Classroom Norms” activity my students and I do. I explained to Teresa that I began integrating the “Classroom Norms” activity in the classes that I teach the term after I experienced it as a student. In one of

my first doctoral-level courses, my professor, Dr. Miriam Raider-Roth, asked us students to brainstorm norms of discussion so that we could create a comfortable environment in which everyone felt that they could contribute to the discussion. This was the first time in my nearly twenty years of schooling that I had ever had the opportunity to voice my expectations for the other students in the class. Reticent to speak in class my entire academic career, I was surprised to find myself participating in this class. If having this discussion on the first day worked for me, maybe it would work for my students.

The next term and every term thereafter, I have set aside the majority of the first or second day of class to hold the “Classroom Norms” discussion. The activity has evolved over time, but currently has the following steps.

- 1) As part of their homework after the first day of class, students post five expectations they have for interacting with each other in Discussion Board.
- 2) In the following class, students share their expectations for each other. As they speak, I type in a document that is projected, so they can see what I am typing and make any corrections if I misrepresent what they say. I also push them to give details. For example, if they say, “Listen to each other.” I ask them, “How do you show someone that you are listening?” These follow up questions are important in revealing their differences and similarities in behavior expectations.
- 3) When they have nothing else to contribute, I have them silently read what I typed. I ask if there is anything missing or if they have concerns about anything written. If not, I ask them to nod to show that they agree with what is written. Then, I inform them that I post the norms on Discussion Board for us to refer to at any time.

- 4) We revisit these at mid-term through a brief class discussion and/or through written reflections and again at the end of the semester.

Teresa: After talking with Angie, I decided to create classroom norms in collaboration with students that semester and have been doing so ever since. In addition to giving students the opportunity to express their expectations for each other, I wanted to try to bridge the cultural differences between me and this new generation, by clearly stating my expectations for them and allowing them to state their expectations for me. I wanted our interactions for the rest of the semester to be as positive as possible, and I hoped that this activity would let us have an understanding of each other's codes.

Thus, my "Classroom Norms" activity is as follows.

- 1) I explain my role as the facilitator of their learning and list my expectations of the class on the board (i.e. coming prepared to class, doing their part when working in groups, etc.). Then, I ask if they think the expectations are fair and we discuss them.
- 2) I divide the class in groups, and I ask them to come up with expectations for me. I provide a couple examples, and I leave the room to encourage discussion that is more open. After a few minutes, I come back, and we share and discuss their expectations for me. On the board, I write our agreed-upon expectations.
- 3) This part is a similar process to the second one and is what Angie does with her students. Students come up with expectations for each other.
- 4) Later, I type the list of expectations that we created and post it on Blackboard, our Learning Management System, for reference. Twice during the semester, or if the majority of the class is not adhering to the expectations, I ask the students to write a

reflection on how well they think they are fulfilling the expectations and if the expectations are helpful.

Angie and Teresa: We both have found the “Classroom Norms” activity to be instrumental in creating a positive learning environment. Not only do students and instructors have a better understanding of each other’s expectations for interaction, students also state that creating expectations together makes them feel like active contributors to the class. This is especially important with this generation, who wants to collaborate in the learning process rather than be told what to do (Seemiller & Grace, 2016).

Perhaps the most powerful testimonial of the effect of the activity is what happened after Teresa completed it with that first group in one of her classes. The most problematic student stood in front of the class and explained that prior to completing the “Classroom Norms” activity, he was not aware that his behavior was preventing other students from learning. He then apologized to everyone! While such a dramatic response is not typical, a positive outcome is. We have had respectful, collaborative learning environments since we began implementing this innovation in our classes, and we are committed to continue using it in the future.

Note: The “Classroom Norms” activities that we use with our students have evolved from our own experiences. For more information on creating classroom norms, refer to Mendiola, E. (2018) *Establishing Classroom rules*. Retrieved from <http://oncourseworkshop.com/table-contents/establishing-classroom-rules/>



## References

Mendiola, E. (2018) *Establishing Classroom rules*. Retrieved from

<http://oncourseworkshop.com/table-contents/establishing-classroom-rules/>

Seemiller, C. and Grace, M. (2016). *Generation Z goes to college*. San Francisco, CA: Josey-Bass.