

## MODULE 3:

# Setting community standards for learning

Community standards, sometimes referred to as classroom guidelines, serve as a collaborative framework for inclusive classroom learning. These guidelines encourage inclusive and productive dialogue in the learning environment. Unlike a classroom contract in a K-12 environment which imposes rules on students and punishes those who disobey, community standards for college learning require that the faculty member and the students in the course work collaboratively to design a living document for the benefit of all members.

Interactively producing these guidelines encourages college students to feel that they have a stake in their own learning. Once they are agreed upon and adopted, the community standards can become the framework for accountable classroom communication.

### Learning objectives

1. Define community standards for learning and explain their importance
2. Appraise suggested community standard themes for universal use
3. Identify methods for creating, revising, and amending community standards for learning and customize by course delivery format

### Community standards for learning and their importance in the college classroom

The community standards for learning form the framework of the class. Once adopted, they will be distributed to all students, referenced frequently, and amended when appropriate. The practice of creating the standards is just as important. If our students feel they are truly co-creators of their class community standards, not only will they be more inclined to follow them, but the guidelines can also significantly improve the tenor of our classroom discussions.

The practice of creating the standards encourages students to reach outside of their comfort zones to share opinions and engage in discourse across differences—skills they will practice throughout the term. The way that professors introduce the community standards activity sets the tone for communication in the class. The in-class activity of creating the community standards works best as a required but non-graded assignment. It is good practice to first engage students in a short discussion about some of their insecurities about the course (or about college in general if the class is composed of first-year students), and ask what communication challenges have arisen in their previous high school or college courses.

### Classroom contracts help explain the power dynamics of learning environments

Most college students have learned about the stratified nature of the society in which they live, but fewer have been taught about how classroom spaces are highly stratified as well. It is often an eye-opening experience (especially for first-year college students) to be asked to think about college classrooms as hierarchical microcosms. Traditionally, the professor as the “sage on the stage” displays all the power from the front of the

room, imparting their knowledge to the seated students. In turn, the students furiously record the information being handed down and at some point are asked to relay that knowledge back.

In a less traditional classroom, educators can feel free to experiment with alternative ways of distributing power. The focus can be on equitability, inclusivity, and encouraging varied student voices. Working with students to set classroom community guidelines is a way for faculty to demonstrate to our students that their thoughts and suggestions are valuable to us and to the class as a whole. This activity is one of many ways students can have input in creating their own productive learning environments. Simultaneously,

### **Previous teaching mishaps and challenges benefit the generation of new ideas**

So many semesters pass when we as faculty fail to learn from our own classroom challenges and teaching mishaps. Perhaps we are quick to put an unfavorable experience behind us, or maybe we don't realize the importance of learning from our classroom mistakes. However, after a class discussion that felt out of our control, or a class debate where students were treating each other disrespectfully, we should be asking ourselves what went wrong.

Many of our classroom challenges could have been avoided, or at least minimized, if we had community standards in place. For example, if there were guidelines for interrupting a student's biased language, would we or another student have used them to diffuse a situation that got out of control? If we had approached a student who spoke too frequently during class discussions early in the semester and reminded them of agreed-upon class guidelines for participation, would that student have been better connected to classmates? If students had helped to create policies for shared responsibility in group project work, would they have felt more empowered to approach a group member they felt wasn't pulling their weight in the assignment?

### **Suggested community standard themes for universal use**

Rather than asking our students to begin brainstorming ideas during the in-class activity where students create community standards for learning, it is best to introduce a general list of themes that are important to us. In addition to saving significant classroom time, introducing the activity on community standards with some themes ready for discussion will be especially useful for first-year students unfamiliar with college-level speaking and listening expectations.

Themes that instructors suggest for inclusion in classroom community standards will vary based on the content of the course, our teaching style, and our course learning objectives. Reviewing our syllabi in advance of creating community standards with our students will ensure that we are taking into account the learning opportunities we have chosen for the course. For example, in a class with in-class debates where we anticipate opposing opinions will most likely be raised, we might want to suggest that students set guidelines related to these activities.

### Five sample themes for community standards

Here are five suggested themes that will work to spark conversation about community standards in most discussion-based classes:

**1. Active listening:**

When creating community standards for learning, the class should collectively decide how they will define active listening and how they will choose to encourage the practice. Perhaps standards will discourage students from raising their hands while others (both faculty and peers) are talking? Will there be rules for laptop and cellphone use during class discussions, and if so, how will they be enforced?

**2. All voices welcome to speak:**

How will the class define “inclusive voices”? Will there be guidelines for balancing the participation of different speakers in the class? Will there be rules for how frequently students speak? How will the community ensure that students differentiate between facts and opinions? Will community members be required to defend their claims with verifiable evidence, and how will it be handled if they do not?

**3. A diverse and inclusive community:**

How will the class define “diverse” and “inclusive” and how will they explain differences between the terms? Will the community standards for learning address ideas of how to respond to speech that is hurtful? Will students be expected to interrupt bias when they hear it, or is this the responsibility of the instructor? Will the class expect apologies from those who offend others? Must these apologies be accepted from class members who felt hurt or wronged?

**4. Confidentiality and community:**

Will the group set guidelines about confidentiality? If so, how will they be enforced? May personal stories that have been shared in class be repeated to others outside of class? If so, will there be rules about anonymity? How will the same rules about confidentiality apply to social media? How will rule-breaking be addressed?

**5. Student Responsibility:**

What responsibility and commitment will students have to the class readings, individual assignments, and due dates? Are there particular rules for group projects? How will it be handled if a student is not pulling their weight in a collaborative assignment? How will community members be responsible for presenting their concerns about specific academic course material or the class environment?

### Creating community standards and the impact of course delivery format

When planning for creating community standards, it is important to consider the manner in which the particular class will be taught: in person or online, synchronous, asynchronous, or a hybrid model. The delivery of the course will influence how the group will actually gather to create the community standards, how the guidelines will be edited, and what the themes of the document itself will be. For example, community standards for participating in class discussions will look quite different for in-person versus online classes.

Students' deep sighs of frustration or shifting in seats, easy to spot in classrooms taught in person, provide a lot of information for instructors; they are tell-tale signs of student discomfort with the material or opinions being presented. Given the difficulty of reading the gestures or body language of our students over video conferencing, it could be argued that community standards for learning might be even more important in classes taught online. If there is the possibility that a class might change from in-person to virtual over the course of the semester, or if students will be attending the class in different formats, the course community standards should reflect this to remain inclusive of all students.

### **Collecting ideas as a class**

There are many different methods for collecting student ideas to create classroom community standards for learning. Suggestions can be recorded by hand on a blackboard, white board, or large Post-it and then photographed to be transcribed later. They can be created in a Google Doc that can be reworked as the ideas are tweaked and later edited by all. Teaching assistants can take the lead in both facilitating the collection of ideas and in further editing the document.

If the class size prohibits creating the document as a full group, breaking the class into small working groups to tackle the language of specific standards and report back to the entire class is a great option. This method also works well in a class being taught in a hybrid format. Students who are meeting in person can work together to brainstorm ideas and create guidelines while students taking the class virtually can be assigned collaborative work on creating select community standards by video chat. Regardless of how ideas for community standards are collected, the timing for the completion of the document is critical. The standards should be in place within the first two weeks of the semester in order to set the tone for the teaching and learning ahead.

### **Revising and amending the document**

Once the community standards document is in a draft format, it can be edited and refined by all members of the classroom community. If the revising and editing takes place during another scheduled class time, it's important to set that time aside so that the working session will not be rushed. One way to approach the exercise is to ask the students to take a few minutes to read specific community standards you have assigned to them and suggest wording that they want to change, remove, or add.

You can then pair students up with a classmate to discuss the edits each student wants to propose. Using a shared laptop or a document in hard copy, the partners can work together to further edit the specific community standards they have been assigned. After a set amount of time, each pair can report their additional proposed edits back to the class.

Once all suggestions have been incorporated, the entire revised document should be distributed to the class. Since all students should feel that the community guidelines accurately represent their interests and are principles by which they are willing to abide, you might consider giving them a few days to offer final feedback. A date that your class community standards for learning will be "ratified" should be clearly delineated on your syllabus.

## Let Freedom (and Respect) Ring

Professors should promote an understanding that the classroom community standards are a living document that can (and should) be amended as specific situations arise and as the students in the course grow to know each other as classmates and colleagues. Addressing the need to amend collaboratively created community standards should be presented as the responsibility of all classroom members. In fact, amending the standards can become the framework for accountable classroom communication.

### **Distributing and displaying the community standards for learning**

After they are finalized, the community standards can be distributed to students virtually or in hard copy. The benefit of having them distributed virtually is the ease with which they can be amended at any point in the semester and immediately be accessible to students. If the faculty member and teaching assistant regularly reference the standards, they model how the guidelines are embedded in the learning environment.

Some professors choose to add the community standards to their class syllabus on the school's online learning platform. Others carry them to class on a poster and hang them at the front of the classroom for the entire semester—others just for the first few weeks. Still other instructors ask students to read some or all of the community guidelines aloud occasionally as a reminder to the group that they have set a collective agreement. Distributing and displaying agreed-upon guidelines in an accessible location is crucial for students to understand their impact on the class and how seriously the community standards are expected to be followed by the learning community.

### **Sample Community Standards for Learning:**

- **Respect**—Give undivided attention to the person who has the floor (permission to speak).
- **Openness**—We will be as open and honest as possible without disclosing others' personal or private issues (e.g., family, roommates, friends). It is okay to discuss situations, but we won't use names or other identifiers. For example, we won't say, "My older brother...", instead we will say, "I know someone who..."
- **Right to pass**—It is always okay to pass (meaning "I'd rather not" or "I don't want to answer").
- **Nonjudgmental approach**—We can disagree with another person's point of view without putting that person down.
- **Taking care to claim our opinions**—We will speak our opinions using the first person and avoid using 'you'. For example, "I think that kindness is important", instead of "You are just mean".
- **Sensitivity to diversity**—We will remember that people in the group may differ in cultural background, sexual orientation, and/or gender identity or gender expression and will be careful about making insensitive or careless remarks.
- **Anonymity**—It is okay to ask any question by using the suggestion box.
- **Acceptance**—It is okay to feel uncomfortable; people feel uncomfortable when they talk about sensitive and personal topics, such as sexuality.
- **Have a good time**—It is okay to have a good time. Creating a safe space is about coming together as a community, being mutually supportive, and enjoying each other's qualities.

- **Respect each other's personal space**—Ask for consent before touching another person, ensure that you are giving people their desired space.

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