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Co-Creating Community Norms

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It seems to me that, in order to create truly democratic and equitable classrooms, we need to first think about how to create classroom "communities"—something that, as Anna Lännström has noted previously, is especially hard to build right now. Communities that create space for all people and perspectives don't just happen randomly or necessarily; they require a great deal of intention and attention. Rules, norms, guidelines, or whatever you want to call them can foster a democratic learning environment in which students feel like they can bring their full selves, ask questions, share misconceptions, try out new ideas, debate, create space for others, plan for action, and grow. I try to build community in lots of different ways in my classes, but an essential activity early on always involves the co-creation of a set of community norms that we all commit to upholding for the semester.

As an initial homework assignment, to prime the community building, I have students fill out a "getting to know you" questionnaire I have fine-tuned over the years. One question, near the end, prompts students to fill in the blank: "As a learner, I do best when my peers…." Then, in class, I ask students to share what they wrote. (In-person, in the past, I would use an anonymous polling software like PollEverywhere. On Zoom, I just have students type into the chat box) As we review and discuss their responses, we all start to get a sense of what kind of support students would appreciate from each other. I then put students in groups (breakout rooms in Zoom) of about 3-5 and ask them to brainstorm answers to the following: *What would*

it look like if we were to bring our "best selves" to class every day? What standards do we want to uphold? I tell students to keep in mind the responses they all shared to the "As a learner, I do best when my peers...." prompt. Each group types their ideas for norms directly into a shared Google Doc (no log-in required) and, once they are finished, we go through each proposed norm, one by one, making sure we all understand what it means, we all know how it would manifest, and we all can "live with it." I usually lead this exercise on the second day of class; sometimes it flows into the third. We discuss for as long as it takes to reach agreement. Along the way, I actively encourage discussion and even dissent; right from the beginning, students know it is okay to critique and disagree.

Generating community norms together not only starts the very process of building a democratic classroom community, but it also provides many "teachable moments." For instance, students will often propose a norm like "respect each other." But what the heck does this mean? I ask them to clarify: how do you understand this word, "respect," and how do you know when someone is "respecting" you—or vice versa? A culture of politeness and "civility" reign at our institution, so I am particularly invested in ensuring that any expectations of "respect" don't serve to stifle or silence. Many typical standards, like "respect," are so vague or generic as to be useless and all too often end up centering the dominant groups or perspectives; this in-class activity allows us the space for this discussion. It also gives me a chance to suggest some norms of my own, since I'm a member of the classroom community too. I will usually propose some from AORTA's Anti-Oppressive Facilitation Guide or "Respect Differences? Challenging the Common Guidelines in Social Justice Education," such as "Strive for intellectual humility. Be willing to grapple with challenging ideas" and "Identify where your learning edge is and push it."

The community norms that the students and I co-create then stay with us over the course of the semester; this is not a "one and done" activity. We revisit them regularly. I project the norms at the beginning of different class periods. I give students a chance to review them and ask if we need to make any amendments. I check in every so often to find out how we think we are doing with the norms. The community norms guide all of our time together. (They also make it much, much easier to address any problems that might emerge in class, because I can simply refer back to the norms that we all agreed to.) At the end of every semester, in their final exams or their final course evaluations, students routinely remark on the "community" feel in my courses, with appreciative comments such as, "The class really seemed like a community, which made it easy to share and participate, and it was clear everyone liked the class and wanted to be there." Without such a community in place, the difficult work of teaching for, about, and toward democracy would, I fear, be a non-starter.

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