Community Agreements

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What is a Community Agreement?

A community agreement is a shared understanding between learners about how everyone wants to work together during the course. The term (classroom) community is used specifically to add the feelings that members have of belonging, that they matter to one another and to the group, and that that the shared expectations are met through their commitment to shared goals (Rovai and Lucking, 2000). In the past, instructors have used terms like ground/classroom rules, community norms/expectations, and other phrases (National Equity Project, 2022). We use the phrase "community agreement" to promote its intent, that instructors and students play a part in development and implementation.

Community agreements are one way trauma-informed pedagogy can be enacted in the classroom; principles of trauma-informed pedagogy benefit all students. Designing community agreements allows students to feel safer, a greater sense of agency, establish greater trust, and better situates themselves to be able to learn (Carello, 2015). Co-creating the agreements provides students an opportunity to advocate for their needs and have their voices heard; thus helping students to feel more valued in class (Marquart et al, 2022). When students self-advocate for their needs in finalizing the community agreement, they have an increase sense of belonging (Vaccaro, et al 2015). If students are also part of ensuring the interactions during the course align with the agreement, this also increases the likelihood they feel like they belong in your course. Freeman et al (2007) states that an increased sense of belonging is associated with greater academic success and motivation.

Implementation Basics

1. Evaluate your course context:
   o How large is your class?
   o What experiences might your students have (familiarity with community agreements)?
2. Decide if you want student feedback and additions to a pre-made list or allow your students to develop statements.
   o It takes time no matter which choice you decide. As long as students have the ability to clarify and revise, the benefits of the agreement are usually present.
3. Determine where the community agreement will live & start the shareable document.
4. Plan when you will discuss the community agreement with students
   o Initial conversation: providing the intention of the agreement & its benefits
   o Development: is this just during class time or will students work before/after class
   o Follow-up the next class session after initial development for further clarifications/edits
   o Review the agreement a few weeks into the semester

Implementation Variations

A. Partially Pre-Developed Community Agreement
- o Develop a list of statements you think will be appropriate for the class
- o Adding clarifications & additions: Provide it to the class and ask them to revise the statements, adding clarifications and additional statement as they see fit
- o Ask students to pick their top five statements from a large list provided (this could be done using a polling software that allows for ranking)

B. Co-create Community Agreement
- o Provide students with a few example statements from other community agreements to help them better understand what is possible
- o Prompt students to brainstorm responses to
  - ▪ I feel included when…
  - ▪ I don't feel included when…
  - ▪ When do you feel respected and valued?
  - ▪ What do you expect from one another?
  - ▪ How can this group support those responses?
- o Consider providing time for students to think and answer the questions before working with others.
  - ▪ You could consider having students partner up, work in small groups or work as an entire class to develop the agreement

Frequently Asked Questions

1. *What are some common statements for community agreements?* Take space, make space is used as a phrase to remind students that everyone can and should participate in some way. That sometimes means that when one responds to a question, the next time they want to respond during that same class, they might instead make space by not responding and/or inviting someone else into the conversation.

2. *Do students really come up with statements that are useful without a pre-made list.* Many agreements that are created without a list to review/revise regularly align with what the instructor had in mind. Again, they aren't making this list without any discussion, you are facilitating the conversation and the development of the community agreement.

3. *How is this different than classroom rules and expectations?* The statements in the community agreement are expectations of how each person will interact/engage. It was not something that the instructor developed and is the authority figure as to it being abided by. In an agreement, everyone involved is always working towards aligning with those statements. There aren't repercussions when they aren't met immediately, just a conversation about what the statements mean and how what just happened didn't align with them.

4. *What if something happens unexpectedly and the community agreement didn't attend to it?* Community agreements should be living documents; meaning they can be edited as the class grows together. Whether it is a new topic or its midway through the semester and it's time to review the agreement. There may be something the students (or you) notice could be further clarified or added to the agreement.

5. *I don't think my students will speak honestly and it will be "crickets" when I try to start discussion.* Building a space where students feel comfortable expressing their beliefs doesn't always

occur on the first day. You could provide alternative opportunities for students to participate if they did not want to verbally contribute. You could have students write down statements on an index card and hand them in. Alternatively, you could use technology to assist in students sharing their opinion without identifying themselves; polling system, Canvas discussion board, google docs or software that allow for anonymous sharing.

Other Resources

Student favorite phrases for community agreements: https://drawingchange.com/co-creating-community-agremeents-in-meetings/

Different suggestions for developing community agreements between lectures and seminars: https://idp.cornell.edu/idp-guides/idp-guide-community-agreements/

Perspectives on norms, rules, and agreements and mechanisms for building an agreement: https://www.nationalequityproject.org/tools/developing-community-agreements

Safer Space Policy / Community Agreement suggests: https://theantioppressionnetwork.com/resources/saferspacepolicy/

Developing Community agreements with 4 conditions (establish inclusion, develop attitude, enhance meaning, engender competence): https://utlc.uncg.edu/teaching/communityagreements/

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