

Safer Space Classroom Agreement

Community or classroom agreements are a set of basic guidelines for safer and more productive discussions and activities among students. Consider each of these guidelines as potential elements of an agreement for your own classroom. Before constructing a Community Agreement, it may be useful to review any accountability measures available to you, such as a Code of Conduct or Anti-Bullying/Anti-Harassment policy. Referencing these documents when creating this agreement will help reinforce the importance of these guidelines both inside and outside the classroom. Consider referencing the support of administration, and the school board as a way of reinforcing the importance of this work within the school community.

It's recommended that you build your classroom agreement with input from students, which also increases the likelihood that they'll make use of it throughout your discussions. Most importantly, make sure everyone understands and consents to working within these guidelines before going forward in discussion. Then post them on the wall for future reference and revisit them whenever necessary. Consider using the following paragraph, or something similar, to introduce the agreement making process:

"Today's conversation is about making a space to ask questions and learn new information, and for this reason I want to talk with you about how we can make sure everyone can have a safer, respectful conversation. I've got some ideas that we can start with, and then I'd like to hear from you about anything you'd like to add. Here we go."

We propose the following 6 guidelines and tools for your consideration:

- **Respect**

Respect encompasses a great deal of information in one word. It can be discussed here in terms of what respectful conversation and dialogue might look like to your students. This could include guidelines such as ensuring people do not interrupt, or talk over others (e.g., will hands be raised? Will you use a 'talking stick'?) or ensuring that appropriate language is used. There is zero tolerance for homophobic or transphobic words and phrases: such as "tranny," "she-male," "that's so gay," "dyke." Ideally, this can be framed in reference to the 'Golden Rule,' the notion that students should treat others the way that they themselves would like to be treated. If possible, consider adding reference to existent school policy that outlines expectations for students around respectful behavior.

- **Openness**

Openness specifically refers to the way in which individuals approach the opportunity to engage with the words, ideas, and experiences of others in the

classroom. It can be framed by referencing that each participant in a conversation brings their own experience, and related ideas, and that students may thus be exposed to new and different perspectives. This guideline encourages students to prepare themselves for conversation by remaining receptive to the differing viewpoints of others within the classroom community.

- **I-Statements**

I-statements can be simply explained as statements that speak from one's own lived experiences through use of the word 'I' (e.g., "I feel," "I'm having trouble understanding..." or "I've experienced..."). Using I-Statements is a conversational technique that helps focus each statement on an individual's experience while simultaneously limiting the potential to make generalizations and/or play the role of 'Devil's advocate.'

- **Confidentiality**

In this case confidentiality refers to the importance of understanding how each of us can share the stories and statements of others in an appropriate and consensual way. Within group conversation, students can consider these aspects when telling stories of their friends, families or associates. Do they have explicit permission from that person to tell their story? Are they considering the impacts of sharing this story or information? Participants can be encouraged to be sure of each of the previous points before sharing any story heard before, during, or after the session.

- **Share the Air**

Here the term air refers to extent to which a student speaks or shares ideas during an activity. Encourage students to consider their airtime. Are they speaking more or less than everyone else? What can they do to ensure their own voice is heard, while also making space for the voices of their peers?

- **Awkwardness is Okay!**

Remind students that much of equity education and social justice work involves discussing and 'unpacking' powerful subjects in a way that often leaves participants feeling emotionally awkward or potentially uncomfortable. Remind students that this is common, and often accompanies some of the self-reflection and discovery necessary to challenge well-established stereotypes and biases embedded within our cultures. For example, when discussing trans women, discomfort and awkwardness often come from societally ingrained, rigid definitions of the gender binary and how men/women are "supposed to act," as well as a socially sanctioned sexism and devaluing of femininity. In cases like this one encourage students to ask themselves "why" they are experiencing discomfort as a tool to uncover potential further learnings. At the same time, students should be encouraged to voice their

concerns when a conversation or topic becomes traumatic, or potentially triggering of previous trauma.

The above classroom guideline suggestions are only some of what could be a much longer and more specific list. When developing a similar document with your students, be sure to allow for a final review of all contents before asking students to provide unanimous consent to working within the terms of your agreement. Remind students that the group can review the agreement at any time if they feel as though the guidelines are not being observed or respected.