
Graduate Division

Graduate Student Instructor TEACHING & RESOURCE CENTER

Basics for GSIs Advancing Your Skills

Creating Community Agreements

Community agreements for discussion in section can help promote and organize productive conversations among students by building a sense of community and setting clear expectations and boundaries. Working with your students to establish agreements cooperatively encourages them to consider each agreement's purpose and gives them a greater investment in abiding by the agreements, thus accepting part of the responsibility for the section's quality.

When establishing section community agreements, clearly distinguish between the course policies and community agreements when introducing section expectations. The purpose of course policies is to define course requirements, procedures, and penalties for absences or late work. While policies pertain to the class as a whole and are generally set by the instructor of record, community agreements are focused on facilitating group discussion in section and are generally initiated by GSIs.

Community agreements are established to facilitate discussion. They ensure that the class environment is respectful and that everyone has an opportunity to participate. More specifically, community agreements have these functions:

- Encourage students to work collaboratively in developing a respectful environment.
- Give students a stake in abiding by the agreed-upon guidelines.
- Establish a process of group participation rather than instructor-led lecture.
- Create an atmosphere in which all students feel free to participate.
- Remind students of the need for respect, openness, and sensitivity.
- Establish the tone for section by encouraging group interaction and feedback.
- Establish the discussion section as a responsibility of both the student and the GSI.

Before you create community agreements, explain their purpose and the reason you have chosen to create them as a group rather than simply stipulating them yourself. We describe below three different methods for creating community agreements.

Small Group Method

Brookfield and Preskill's Method

Acronym Method

Small Group Method

- Break students into groups of three or four. Give each group an index card and ask them to list two potential agreements they think are important for a good discussion section. Allow them five to ten minutes to complete the activity.
- Go around the room and ask each group for their agreements. Write the proposed agreements on the board. Ask the groups to explain their reasons for suggesting a particular agreement and to specify what they mean if the agreement they suggest is vague. There may be some overlap.
- After all of the groups have given their proposed agreements, ask the entire class if there are any other ones that they would like to add to the board. This is a good time to add or share any potential agreements that you may have that weren't suggested by the groups.
- Open the list up for discussion. Let the students debate the value of specific agreements or the expectations underlying them.
- At the end of the discussion, ask the students to vote on the list. This allows them to decide as a class which community agreements they would like to have for the semester.
- Record the community agreements. Copy the list and bring it to section the following week. This way all students have copies that they can refer to over the semester.
- Periodically, have the class take a moment to evaluate whether the community agreements established at the beginning of the semester are being followed and if they work.

Developed by Heather McCarty, Sociology

Brookfield and Preskill's Method

- Ask the students to think about the best group discussions they have been involved in. What happened that made these discussions so satisfying?
- Next ask the students to think about the worst group discussion in which they have been involved. What happened that made these discussions so unsatisfactory?
- For each of the characteristics, have the students suggest three things that the group could do to make discussions more productive.
- Use the students' suggestions to draft a set of community agreements on which you all agree.
- Record the community agreements. Copy the list and bring it to section the following week. This way all students have copies that they can refer to over the semester.

- Periodically, have the class take a moment to evaluate whether the community agreements established at the beginning of the semester are being followed and whether they work.

Adapted from Brookfield, S. and Preskill, S. (1999). *Discussion as a Way of Teaching: Tools and Techniques for Democratic Classrooms*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Acronym Method

- Write the words “Community Agreements” on the top of the board. Write the word “ROPES” along the left hand side of the board (or use a similar word).
- Explain that, like a safety net, the ROPES will serve as communally agreed-upon guidelines to which everyone will adhere during the discussion section.
- Elicit from the students words (related to community agreements) that begin with those letters. Ask the students to explain why they have recommended a word and what it means to them. For example, R: respect, responsibility; O: openness, etc.
- Add your own suggestions.
- Ask for a general consensus about which agreements are chosen.
- Record the community agreements. Copy the list and bring it to section the following week. This way all students have copies that they can refer to over the semester.
- Periodically, have the class take a moment to evaluate whether the community agreements established at the beginning of the semester are being followed and whether they work.

Teaching Guide for GSIs

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