

Student-Constructed Classroom Guidelines: How to Involve Students in the Creation of a Tailored Classroom Environment

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ABSTRACT

When students begin a new class, they are often given a list of guidelines outlining how the classroom environment should look and how the students (and sometimes the instructors) should behave. These lists impose the instructor's preferences for classroom behavior on students and may exacerbate the inherent power dynamics at play in a classroom. In addition, instructor-created guidelines may not be sensitive to the cultural needs of students in our increasingly global classrooms. This paper presents a novel way of creating classroom guidelines by asking the students themselves to construct them on the first day of class. The themes that arose from the student-identified desires included respect for others, a safe environment, clear course structure, hands-on activities, course rigor, open food policy, clear explanations, opportunity for movement, and congenial group work. The suggestions offered in this paper can assist instructors in tailoring learning environments to students and creating a safe and inviting classroom culture from day one. Filling a gap in the literature, this work offers suggestions for student-centered classroom guidelines that reflect the desires of the contemporary graduate student.

TOPICS

education programs/schools, students, teaching faculty

BACKGROUND

In this age of flipped classroom environments, it is still true that on the first day of class most instructors distribute a preset syllabus and discuss their own preferences for what the classroom environment should look like. Researchers have begun to explore how to incorporate student-centered instruction from day one "asking students to help us create a team that will inspire each of them" (Tomlinson, 2018). Initial research has demonstrated that using an adaptive syllabus increases student engagement (Maniu & Raulea, 2019) and involving students

with the planning of courses enhances feelings of autonomy (Troisi, 2015). This study sought to identify what guidelines students themselves identify as important for building their graduate school classroom environments. Rather than imposing rigid classroom guidelines on these working adults, the instructor opened the floor for students to dictate their desired classroom environment.

METHODS

Over a two-year period as the instructor of seven different sections of the same introduction to library sciences course, the author asked students what they would like the classroom guidelines for that specific class to be. The students were all in their first semester of a Master of Library Science program, many of whom had been out of school for a while and/or were working professionals. Students were often a little shy at first, new to the idea that classroom guidelines could be student-constructed. When asked for examples, the instructor would provide prompts such as “How would you like you like your fellow students and/or the instructor to act? How would you like the classroom environment to look like?” Responses were collected orally and shared in a course-specific Google Document. This activity took about ten minutes on average to conduct.

RESULTS

The range of responses covered a host of classroom guideline-related areas. A total of 85 responses were collected across the seven sections of this introductory course. These responses were then hand-coded with an open coding approach to identify the main themes, which included respect for others, a safe environment, clear course structure, hands-on activities, high course rigor, open food policy, clear explanations, opportunity for movement, and congenial group work.

Student Identified Guidelines

The most popular request from students related to a desire for a respectful learning environment (n=24). This topic was mentioned in each of the seven sections without specific probing from the instructor. The direct quotes range from very broad (i.e., “be respectful”) to specific situations (e.g., “give the floor to someone else when two people start talking at once”). Specific examples of showing respect included not being on phones, "don't hog talking time," keep distracting laptop behavior to a minimum, be on time, and be patient with students and instructors.

The next most common request demonstrated students’ keen interest in a safe learning environment (n=22, also mentioned in all seven sections). Here students clearly articulated their desires for a safe space to ask questions and acknowledge that students come from a variety of backgrounds. One student requested that individuals would not "make assumptions about other people's backgrounds, experiences, and opinions." Relatedly, a student asked for an "understanding [that] we have different lived experiences and [to] check the assumptions we make about others." In summary, students wanted a “safe space for sharing questions and

experiences.” While this may be something that an instructor says they want to create on the first day, by having these desires come directly from the students, the instructor can seek to create a safe learning environment by having students express their vision of what that looks like.

Students also shared requests for how the course would be structured (n=7). They asked for opportunities to learn "from a variety of sources and source types" and wanted to see "discussions about books and readings in face-to-face" class sessions. They had specific requests about how the class would be organized within the online course management software and asked for students to "post something early in the week so we can respond." An instructor's requests for students to post early during a module may fall on deaf ears, but it may enhance the likelihood of adherence if students hear suggestions for fostering richer online discussions directly from their peers.

Students shared an interest in hands-on activities (n=7). These included "break[ing] into small groups to talk about specific discussion questions before sharing with the class" and "opportunities to talk with others in the class - not just lecture and speakers." One student requested "games - making learning fun." These suggestions support continued use of the flipped-classroom pedagogical approach as a method that meets the interests of students.

DISCUSSION

One of the benefits of having students construct their own classroom guidelines is an enhanced sense of buy-in to what the instructor is hoping the classroom environment will look like. Instead of hearing from someone else how they should act, when a student hears it from a fellow student or even makes the request themselves, they may be more likely to adhere to the class-created guidelines without the instructor needing to constantly harp on their own desires for student conduct.

These student-created classroom guidelines outlined here, including respect for others, a safe environment, clear course structure, hands-on activities, high rigor for the course, open food policy, clear explanations, opportunity for movement, and congenial group work, demonstrate what students seek in contemporary classroom environments. Rather than imposing an instructor-created desired conduct list, this approach allows for the classroom culture to be sensitive to the needs of the students in that class. This could be especially helpful if the instructor is not as familiar with the cultures of their students in our increasingly global learning environments. While these requests were collected orally and in person, this type of work could also be done in an online-only classroom by asking students to add their requests to a shared document or post in an anonymous tool (e.g., PollEverywhere). Additional research should be conducted to determine the most effective way to collect student-created classroom guidelines and to analyze the effectiveness of this approach. The suggestions offered here can assist instructors in tailoring learning environments to students and creating a safe and inviting classroom culture from day one.

REFERENCES

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