Creating Collaborative Norms in the Classroom

The intended purpose of this resource is to support educators and students in feeling supported through constructing a classroom culture with explicit norms and expectations for engagement and respectful participation.

Educator Awareness

Developing an awareness of how an educator's own emotions and perspectives influence the conversation helps prepare them when challenging conversations occur. Educators who are experienced in dealing with their own intense emotions can model effective management strategies to students. The following questions are important to reflect on regularly:

- What positive experiences can I draw on to inform how to deal with challenging conversations?
- Are there topics that I am uncomfortable discussing? What are they, and what about these topics makes me uncomfortable?
- How can I share my relevant personal experiences while remaining unbiased?
- In what ways is my own culture (e.g., race, class, gender, sexuality, ability) influencing my perspectives and reactions?
- What techniques can I rely upon to check my own emotional reactions to student comments?

When educators are aware of how their own biases, emotions, and perspectives may shape a conversation, they are better positioned to facilitate productive discussions that maintain civility. Developing such awareness allows for collective expression of vulnerability without judgement.

High Expectations for All Students

Effective educators hold high expectations for participation and learning for all students in their classroom. These high expectations align with the Utah Core Standards, along with the classroom culture and their established norms and rules.

- To support creating safety and providing students with a sense of ownership and buy-in, classroom norms should be established with student input at the beginning of each school year. One example of collaborative norms includes the 7 Norms of Collaboration.

- To help all students participate in respectful ways, using specific discussion protocols can be helpful. Visit Orchestrating Productive Classroom Discussions for some examples of useful discussion protocols.

Respect for All Voices

Active listening is a key factor in a respectful and successful classroom culture. Active listening creates an environment in which all students are encouraged to actively listen to their classmates' ideas, thoughts, and beliefs before providing their own input. This fosters an environment that fosters respectful classroom discussion.

- Facilitate different types of discussions to allow all voices to be heard. Remember that not all students are comfortable voicing their opinions out loud, so having multiple ways (partners, small groups, written, etc.) to express themselves is helpful.
- Foster an environment where all voices and multiple perspectives are respected and encouraged. Make it clear that it is ok to have an opinion on the subject matter but that other voices should be heard as well. (Consider using discussion facilitation tools like listing who has spoken or time limits to allow for all classroom participants to speak).
- Foster respectful and civil conversation. Educators who model that all voices and opinions are valued help students learn how to disagree respectfully.
- For more information, you may visit: Difficult dialogues or Open and Closed Topics

Reflection

Reflection is an essential step that allows time for students to consider how they participated in the discussion as well as time for the students and educators to process the information presented in the discussion. This creates a space to explore the fact that not everything will have a conclusion or an agreed upon solution.

In implementing the reflection aspect of the collaborative norms process there are a variety of methods that can be used such as written, oral, art, music, etc. By providing time to reflect, educators create a dedicated time and space to allow an expression of understanding, while ensuring the means and methods are age-appropriate and leaves opportunity for creativity. Some examples of reflection practices include:

Written
- Writing exercises (story creation, ethnography, poetry, thought diary, etc.)
- Personal journal, collaboration board, online discussion, etc.

Oral
- Communication Circle
  - Coming back together after a discussion/ experience in small groups.
  - This is a more controlled safe space conversation about what was previously discussed, reflecting on the experience, not a continuation of the discussion.
  - Asking students questions about their experience. These might include: What stood out to you during the conversation or experience? Is there something you did not understand? How did you feel? How did you perceive the way others felt? What approaches would you take next time?
- Pair-sharing
  - Assigning or rotating pairs to do reflection chats with each other, especially if a student does not feel comfortable communicating with a large group, in writing, or other creative means.

Artistic expression
- Visual Art
  - Drawings, paintings, murals to express ideas
- Drama
  - Tableau to represent ideas and situations

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- ○ Short skits
  - ○ Role plays
- ● Music
  - ○ Music ideas through body percussion or simple melodies
  - ○ Song lyrics
- ● Dance
  - ○ Creative dance representing points of view, subject content, and historical perspectives
- ● Film and Media Arts
  - ○ Stop-motion representations
  - ○ Short video recordings

Final Steps

Educators need to ensure time at the end of discussions (even if impromptu) to impartially deliver a summary or conclusion of information presented. This will help students to synthesize information and will allow them to leave the class with some closure, even if there was no resolution to the discussion.

Every relationship we have functions within a set of norms. Classrooms are no different and need to be a safe space to explore important, albeit sometimes challenging topics. Though having collaborative classroom norms will not prevent all problematic conversations, they will help educators and students get back on track quickly. When educators have reflected on their own biases and opinions, they are better prepared to model how to be impartial and respectful in discussions. Educators will also be better prepared on how to handle conversations when they veer off-track. It is especially important for educators to allow time for student reflection to synthesize information addressed in discussions and to deliver a conclusion or summary of information presented before class is dismissed.