

Classes That Thrive: Negotiating Classroom Community Values

by [Rogers Walker](#)

Too often in teaching we focus on encouraging students to conform to behavioral norms, as opposed to helping them explore and develop a system of values that can drive optimal classroom performance. Addressing behavior only when disruptive incidents arise is akin to a game of whack-a-mole: New behaviors and situations will emerge that require slightly varied responses. However, teachers can help guide students toward successful academic behaviors by engaging them in an exploration of healthy class values. Classrooms develop their own microcultures with constituent values and expectations for behavior, yet students are often blind to what these expectations are. Part of this myopia is the result of cross-cultural differences in value prioritization and the behaviors associated with these values (Ting-Toomey, 2012). As instructors, part of our role is to help students discover and develop the values that we hope will guide our classes and provide maximal support for learning. One way to achieve this goal is to have students collaborate to define the values and associated behaviors that will govern the class community.

Purpose

The purpose of this lesson is to help teachers and students co-construct a set of values for their class culture. Ancillary goals include assisting students with defining appropriate and inappropriate classroom behaviors and developing the communal linguistic resources for enacting classroom values.

Materials: Value Ranking worksheet, Values Perspective Grid worksheet, Behaviors Ranking worksheet, Reflection Prompts worksheet, reflection journal or online discussion forum
Audience: Intermediate- to advanced-level students
Objectives: Student reflection on personal values, negotiation of the values and related behaviors that students want to guide their class
Outcome: Establishing a list of the top 10 class values, determining behaviors that are appropriate for class, creating a bank of language for upholding class values
Duration: 1.5 hours

Part I: Value Selection

The teacher should explain that the class is going to begin a process of selecting and defining the most important values that will govern the class. The teacher should briefly elicit a definition of the word values and elicit from students the merits of basing decisions and behaviors on values.

1. Students should first spend some time thinking about the values that are most important to them. Pass out the Value Ranking worksheet and give students about 5 minutes to read the values and circle the five values they think are most important for the class.
2. Put students in small groups of four to six, and have them share their choices and briefly explain their selection.

3. Assign a leader for each group, and explain that he/she should facilitate a discussion about which values the group wants to select for the top five class values. Once five have been selected, the leader should facilitate ranking them.
4. Have the leader of each group write these values on the board, leaving some space below each word.
5. Erase any duplicate values and then have all students in class come to the board and vote on their top 10 values by putting “line” marks by the 10 values they like the most. Teachers can also use an online polling software such as www.polleverywhere.com and have students vote on smartphones or tablets.
6. Tally the results and place numbers 1 through 10 beside the values in descending order of the number of votes they received.

Part II: Perspectives and Behaviors

The teacher should explain that students should examine in more detail the top value that the class selected.

1. Pass out a Values Perspective Grid worksheet to each student, and ask each student to work independently to complete the first section on the left in reference to the top value. The teacher should explain that students should define what the value means to them. Before students write the behaviors and language that supports and destroys this value, the teacher should ask students to think about actions they have observed in this and other classes.
2. Next, explain to students that they will need to interview a classmate using the worksheet to discover their classmate’s perspective about the value. Before handing out the worksheet, the teacher should be sure to review the language on the worksheet and elicit a couple of examples from the class for each category.
3. Pair students and have them interview each other, noting their partner’s responses on the worksheet. When pairing students, try to select pairs that are from heterogeneous first languages.

Part III: Selecting Behaviors

After completing both sections of their Values Perspective Grid, students should rejoin the same group of students from Part 1 to discuss their findings. The teacher should explain to the class that the goal of the task is to select the behaviors that both students and the teacher will be expected to perform and avoid in a variety of classroom situations.

1. Pass out one Behavior Ranking worksheet to each group of students. Explain that each group should discuss its responses to the Values Perspective Grid and negotiate to select

the top three “most destructive behaviors,” “most supportive behaviors,” and “most appropriate phrases” and add them to the appropriate location on the worksheet.

2. The teacher should create the following three headings on the board or chart paper: “most destructive behaviors,” “most supportive behaviors,” and “most appropriate phrases.”
3. Have students from each group come to the board and write their selections under the appropriate header on the board.
4. The teacher should facilitate a discussion with students about how their selections relate to the general expectations for behavior in U.S. higher education. The teacher may need to revise or supplement the choices based on his/her “expert” knowledge of U.S. norms and his or her preferences.
5. Once the information has been written on the board, students should be asked to vote on the top three from each category. This can be done either by having students write a “line” by their choices or by using an online polling software such as www.polleverywhere.com.

Part IV: Reflection and Accountability

After the class has voted, the teacher should lead a discussion about how everyone in the class is responsible for holding each other accountable for the values and behaviors they have chosen. The teacher can use the provided Reflection Prompts to have students reflect on their choices in a class LMS discussion board or in a reflection journal. Finally, the teacher should create a class Google doc to document the responses and to track the language used for each value. Students can be assigned to update the doc as they learn new phrases or when they complete this lesson again examining a different value.

Conclusion

The co-construction of classroom norms empowers students and gives them a stake in upholding the selected values and behaviors. Many educators strive to help students adapt to the norms of U.S. higher education so that their students can be autonomous learners and supportive classmates. Making values a central part of a class can help guide this adaptive process. As Duckworth (2016) writes, “Over time and under the right circumstances the norms and values of the group to which we belong become our own. We internalize them” (p. 247). If we want to set students up for future success, it is essential that we establish and practice fruitful class group values and norms.

References

Duckworth, A. (2016). *Grit: The power of passion and perseverance*. New York, NY: Scribner.

Ting-Toomey, S. (2012). Understanding intercultural conflict competence. In J. Jackson (Ed.), *The Routledge handbook of language and intercultural Communication* (pp. 279–295). New York, NY: Routledge.

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