Developing Common Agreements for Class Discussion

Purpose

By establishing norms of behavior for student participation, a safe environment for open communication can be achieved. The posted common agreements allow for group interaction that is respectful and facilitates discussion. Some instructors review the common agreements at the beginning of each class or periodically during the quarter.

Process

There are multiple ways to develop common agreements for classroom interaction. Here are three sample methods:

- **Instructor Developed** — The instructor prepares the discussion guidelines prior to the first class and shares them with the students. Then ask the students to review the agreements and make recommendations for changes or additions. Before adopting the agreements for the class, it is important to confirm agreement by all class members. This might be the process if the class is for one period or a couple of sessions.

- **Group Developed** — Following an orientation to the importance of class participation and the need to establish guidelines for conversation, the students brainstorm a list of behaviors which are charted by the instructor. The group then works to remove redundancy, and a final list is posted after the instructor and students have agreed to these rules.

- **Small group method** — Working in small groups, each person is given two cards on which to write their recommendations for the common agreements. Each group then reviews the cards and develops a new list incorporating the recommendations from the group. Each group list is shared and then consolidated for the final list. This could be the process to use if it is anticipated their will be difficult conversations in the class during multiple periods. Barley, Cross and Major (2005) recommend starting the process by asking student to respond to two questions: What behaviors do you think will be most helpful for groups? What behaviors will be least productive in groups? Again, these agreements should be confirmed by the instructor and the students.

References


Resources

http://gsi.berkeley.edu/resources/discussion/index.html
- This document provides multiple methods for developing ground rules including the Brookfield and Preskill's method (1999).

http://cte.udel.edu/TAbook/ground.html
- This sample list of ground rules provides references to dealing with the issues of sexism and racism in the classroom.

http://www.class.uidaho.edu/soc301/ground_rules.htm
- Developed for a sociology class, this sample list of ground rules for class discussion emphasizes sensitive issues.