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SHOW & TELL: A VIDEO COLUMN

Why Classroom Agreements?



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When students mutually agree on behavioral guidelines, they develop a greater sense of ownership over the classroom.

Abstract



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[Abstract](#)

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Ineffective classroom management is often identified as a root cause of problematic student behaviors. School leaders, especially those tasked with student discipline, often note inconsistencies in classroom management: While many referrals come from some classrooms, teachers in other classes rarely send students to the office. And in some cases, students who are routinely disruptive for one teacher rarely display the same friction with other teachers.

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research literature published between 1969 and 2004 on characteristics of effective classroom rules yielded these recommendations:

- Use three to five rules that are positively stated and publicly posted.
- Balance specificity with general rules that guide students.
- Teach and reteach the rules throughout the year. 1

While these guidelines are useful, they don't fully capture the dynamics of classroom life in today's education landscape. Teachers face challenges that didn't exist or weren't commonly discussed when these studies were performed. So, how do we leverage the assets students bring to today's classroom communities to create a climate of student ownership in classroom management? We discuss here an approach to rules development that involves students in their construction. Rather than rules, let's call them *classroom agreements*.

What Are Classroom Agreements?

Traditional classroom management leaves rules development up to the teacher, who then shares the rules with students. Classroom agreements, on the other hand, involve students more directly in their formation. Classroom agreements are formulated *with* students, under the guidance of the teacher. They define the fundamental norms of an effective classroom and focus on how we communicate with one another and accomplish work productively.

Every organization functions according to named and unnamed agreements. Members give up some individual freedoms to invest in the common good of the

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each person has to others. This is what we call the *social contract* of the classroom.

As the leader of the classroom community, the teacher has the moral and ethical obligation to ensure a safe and growth-producing learning environment where each member can thrive. For teachers, a crucial obligation is ensuring classroom flow, meaning that instruction is organized, transitions are efficient, and the teacher is willing to make decisions for the good of the group. Therefore, rules are necessary to govern the orderly transaction of schooling every day.

Classroom agreements are additions that uphold the rules and reflect the values of the classroom community. These jointly constructed norms speak to the vital nature of cooperation and positive relationships in the classroom. Learning environments blossom when they are centered around three key points:

- **Rigor:** Students are encouraged to take academic risks.
- **Relevance:** Learning is deepened when the strengths and knowledge of community members are leveraged.
- **Relationships:** Consideration for others is as important as self.



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classroom community.

These three fundamental constructs—rigor, relevance, and relationships—form the core of effective classroom agreements. Therefore, jointly constructed classroom agreements should reflect these principles.

Developing Classroom Agreements

Discussion of classroom agreements should be developmentally appropriate and geared toward the strengths and needs of the group. For instance, primary teachers might use morning circle to discuss one idea at a time. Monday's discussion might be about how we use our words to express our thoughts and ideas. One kindergarten class might settle on "We use respectful words," while the classroom next door may decide, "We are kind and caring toward each other." On Tuesday, the topic might then turn to how materials are shared. It is the *student ownership* of the wording and the discussion that surrounds it that offers the true power of classroom agreements.

Teachers should frame agreements by sharing nonnegotiables as a starting point for further discussion. We begin our high school classes with three nonnegotiables that appear in every syllabus: (1) *Take care of yourself.* (2) *Take care of each other.* (3) *Take care of this place.* From there, the discussion begins about agreements that govern the classroom. Because the agreements are unique to each group, they change by class period. Our second period class, for example, offered that "One voice at a time during discussions" was a great way to ensure

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column, 4th grade teacher Sarah Ortega from Chula Vista Elementary School and her students discuss the classroom agreements they developed.

Maine Teacher of the Year candidate Jeff Bailey shared in a blog [2](#) that he uses reflection questions to spur further consideration as the classroom agreements develop:

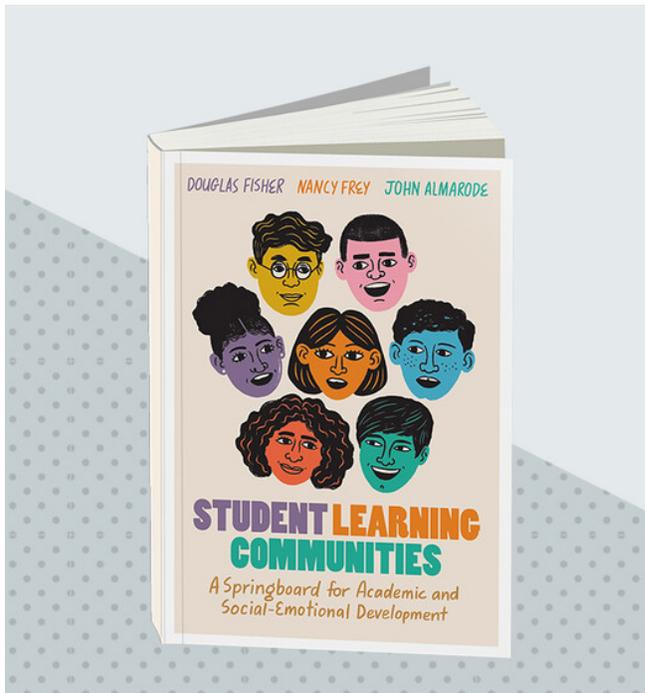
- Stand back and look. Are there any gaps?
- Are there any we cannot live with?
- Are there any here that are more important than others?

Fostering Student Ownership

Classroom agreements have the potential to increase true student ownership of the classroom. And they don't have to be relegated to a beginning of the year activity: Reopen the discussion periodically for further revisions. As the classroom community evolves, so should its norms. In doing so, you communicate your values as a responsive teacher.

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Student Learning Communities

With the right planning and support, dynamic collaborative learning can thrive. This book explains how to create and sustain student learning communities, including creating shared agreements about success.

[Learn more](#)

End Notes

- 1. Alter, P., & Haydon, T. (2017). Characteristics of effective classroom rules: A review of the literature. *Teacher Education & Special Education*, 40(2), 114–127.
- 2. Bailey, J. (n.d.) Creating a classroom contract with students. [Blog post]. www.mainetoy.org/blog/post/creating-a-classroom-contract-with-students

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