



## Establishing Class Norms

*Classroom norms are agreed upon guidelines for how students conduct themselves in a classroom environment. Just as in face-to-face course settings, online classroom norms are an important part of creating a positive learning environment. Norms give students an understanding of class expectations, help students feel comfortable, and establish a sense of trust between classmates. Norms also make the course environment feel safer and learning is more likely to occur as a result.*

### **Why Establish Norms in Online Courses?**

Due to the novelty of online courses, setting norms is especially important because many students will have little knowledge of how to participate effectively in an online course. This uncertainty may lead to a lack of meaningful participation and therefore limit learning. Norms help students learn how to work with other students and with the instructor, and provide a reference for working with students who are not abiding by the rules.

***I am teaching an online or blended class and I would like to my students to communicate effectively, participate in full, and treat each other fairly. How can I encourage this behaviour?***

Develop norms for the online classroom.

- Involve students in setting their own online classroom norms. Create a discussion forum for students to share their experiences and ideas about proper behaviours for an online class. Reserve the right to negotiate if the student-developed norms conflict with one of your strongly-held beliefs.
- Ensure that students agree to the norms so they can help hold each other accountable.
- Consider the norms to be a working document and work with the class to update them as needed.

Discuss the need to create and set classroom norms for an online environment. Some typical problems that occur in online communication include:

- Misunderstandings due to unclear content in messages.
- Tensions resulting from word choices (online tone).
- Students feeling left out if no one responds to their postings.
- Students sending too many messages, especially messages that are not meaningful.
- Students not posting any messages or not responding to other students' messages.
- Students posting several topics under one subject line.



### Give Me an Example

You can use the following activity to set norms for an online class. Plan the activity for the first week of class. If the course takes place in a blended learning environment, parts of this activity can take place online and other parts can be used in the face-to-face sessions.

- Divide the class into small groups and assign each group a work space on the Web site.
- Ask groups to generate a list of norms they believe are suitable for class behaviour. The list should contain five to ten items but can be longer. Each group must come to an agreement on the list and post the list in a discussion forum for others to read. Topics might include participation levels, message content and format, active listening, interpersonal communication, references (citations), confidentiality, attitude and timeliness. Remember to reserve your right to renegotiate norms that conflict with your beliefs about effective teaching and learning in online environments.
- Create two lists – one with common norms and one with norm suggestions that did not appear in all groups.
- Ask students to review the lists, discuss any points that you do not agree with, and then come to agreement on the final list.
- Review the list and post it. If there are any points you do not support, then renegotiate that point.
- Ensure that norms are followed throughout the course by encouraging students to monitor their own behaviours and the behaviours of others. You can intervene as necessary.
- Check in with students after a few weeks to see if any norms need to be altered or new ones need to be added.

### More Ideas

These typical norms have been taken from the Distance Learning List Guidelines in *Selfhelp Magazine* at [www.selfhelpmagazine.com/ppc/distance/distancelearning5.html](http://www.selfhelpmagazine.com/ppc/distance/distancelearning5.html).

- **Format** — The format should be informal but thoughtful. Do not send students a note until you have taken time to review its contents and header. Make sure your message is correctly addressed, free of typos, and clear in meaning. Give your message a meaningful and accurate subject line descriptor. This will eliminate the need for subscribers to sort through mail with topics that do not interest them.
- **Sensitivity** — Keep sensitivity in mind. Remember that there are human beings with feelings who read the messages.
- **Humour** — Be very cautious about using sarcasm and humour. Without nonverbal cues and voice tone, “subtle” humour can easily be interpreted as searing sarcasm.
- **Confidentiality** — Inform students that confidentiality is important and work that is posted in an online environment should not be shared outside the classroom, except with permission of the writer.

### More Ideas Continued...

- **Context and quotes** — Include the points that you are responding to in the text of your reply by quoting or summarizing a portion of the text from the original message. Establish and use professional guidelines when citing references.
- **Response time** — Check and respond to your e-mail regularly (e.g., every morning, every other day) and respond promptly. This norm could be negotiated during the norm development activity.
- **Respect** — Be respectful of differences. Do not expect all classmates to agree with everything you say and be considerate of differing opinions, even if you do not agree.

### Other Considerations

- To spur students to develop norms, ask them to discuss their previous experiences with online learning or online communication and identify what worked, what did not work and why.
- In a blended learning environment you may also want to set norms for the face-to-face portion of the class.
- Rather than use the discussion board to establish norms in an online course, consider using synchronous communication tools such as Centra, Elluminate or chat rooms.
- The voting function in a system such as Centra or Elluminate is helpful to determine agreement.

### Where Can I Go for More Information?

#### 1. Distance Learning List Guidelines

Provides a list of “netiquette” that is important in online courses. Published in *Selfhelp Magazine* (n.d.).

<http://www.selfhelpmagazine.com/ppc/distance/distancelearning5.html>

#### 2. Research to Practice Online: Conditions that Foster Democracy, Community and Critical Thinking in Computer-Mediated Discussions

Gauske, J. & Wade, S. (2003-2004). *Journal of Research on Technology in Education*, 36(2), 137-153.

#### 3. Knowledge Building Community: Keys for Using Online Forums

Li, Q. (n.d.). *TechTrends*, 47(7), 24-28.

#### 4. Building Swift Trust in Virtual Teams

Tovey, J., Southard, S. & Bates, C. (2005, February). *Technical Communication*, 52(1), 1-6.