

Group Guidelines

In order to encourage students to communicate and cooperate more effectively in a seminar type course, I ask students to develop a list of group guidelines for student interactions near the beginning of each term. I divide students into small groups and ask each group to decide on one or two guidelines for working together in our course. When explaining the assignment, I include a couple of simple examples, such as: "Give everyone a chance to speak" and "In a group assignment, each person will contribute".

When each small group reports back to the class, all the guidelines are written on a whiteboard. I facilitate a large group discussion of the list that clarifies wording and combines similar items. Everyone is encouraged to participate as the list is compiled and refined. At the end of the discussion, students are asked to commit to the group guidelines they have created together. A day or two is allowed for students to suggest changes before the guidelines are posted on the Blackboard course site. The entire process takes approximately 20-30 minutes of class time. Once or twice during the semester I'll ask the class if they'd like to make any revision or additions to the guidelines. Some of the guidelines that my students have developed include:

- Avoid inappropriate language (insults, curse words, etc.)
- Keep it civil. Do not personally attack an individual. No name-calling.
- Give every class member a chance to speak. Try not to interrupt.
- Listen to each other.
- If you want something to be confidential, request confidentiality.
- Be respectful.
- When you hear different opinions, keep an open mind.

There are several benefits from this activity. The students take ownership of the guidelines and the agreed upon behavior becomes a normal expectation. More effective group communication means a more effective learning environment for everyone. The guidelines help shy students feel safe to speak out more frequently and slow down those that tend to dominate the conversation. Students tend to quickly recognize when a guideline is broken and, instead of complaining to the instructor, they simply remind each other of their agreement.

Additional Resources:

Creating Effective Groups: The art of small group communication by Randy Fujishin

The Fundamentals of Small Group Communication by Scott A. Myers and Carolyn M. Anderson

Small Group Teaching: a Troubleshooting Guide by Richard G. Tiberius

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