A Method for Helping Students Create their Own Class Norms/Community Standards

Importance of classroom culture

"Even though some of us might wish to conceptualize our classrooms as culturally neutral or might choose to ignore the cultural dimensions, students cannot check their sociocultural identities at the door, nor can they instantly transcend their current level of development."

*The following is a guideline to begin establishing group or class norms (or community standards or community agreements – choose the terminology you like best) so that all students feel they are an integral part of a group or class. Group norms will be established whether or not we, as instructors, facilitate their establishment. The beginning of a semester gives us the perfect opportunity to help students establish for themselves norms for an inclusive, supportive community of learners (***see bold for suggestions to adapt this process for large enrollment classes***)*:

1. Ask students to think about the best groups/classes in which they have participated and reflect on what made this group/class so functional.

For large classes…
Students work in groups of 4 – 6 to come to consensus on this reflection.

Walk around the room and record most repeated characteristics of best/worst classes. Offer the class the top 5 positive, top 5 negative characteristics to work with. Display these on a screen. Tell students this is a summary of everything you heard as you roamed the room. A TA can help with this process. Divide the room into sections for you/TAs to cover. Be aware of getting to every part of the room and check in with groups.

2. Next, ask students to think about the worst groups/classes in which they have participated and reflect on what made these groups/classes so dysfunctional.

For large classes…
Same process as #1.

Come to a whole class consensus asking students to raise the number of fingers for the one they think is most important (1 – 5). Choose top 3 voted on.

3. For each of the positive characteristics identified, ask student to suggest three things the group could do to ensure that these characteristics are present.

For large classes...
Project on a screen the top 3 positive and top 3 negative characteristics of a class screen. Groups work together again to make 3 suggestions everyone (including the instructor) can do to ensure a positive and productive experience for everyone.

4. For each of the negative characteristics identified, ask student to suggest three things the group could do to ensure that these characteristics are not present.

For large classes...
See #3 – collect group suggestions (one piece of paper per group)

5. Use students' suggestions to draft a set of [group/class norms] to which you all agree, and distribute them in writing.

For large classes...
Scan through suggestions to find commonalities. These become class norms/community standards. Add these to the syllabus. Give each group a copy plus one extra for each group member to sign and turn in to you.

6. Periodically ask the class to reflect on whether the [group norms] established at the beginning of the semester are working, and make adjustments as necessary.

For large classes...
Choose a norm/standard for each week. Display this norm and make reference to it at the beginning of class. You can choose a norm at random or based on current behavior in class.

7. Use the specific language of the group norms when complimenting students or when working with students to change classroom practices.