

Critical Learning Communities: Top Five Principles to Guide Your First Month *Kristen Luschen and Becky Wai-Ling Packard*

Students not only need the skills and knowledge to reflect and act upon the world in order to transform it they need support networks— critical communities— to sustain them in their practices and the inevitable resultant struggles.

The goal of critical community work is to create a nurturing space where we can interdependently and collectively read the world through a critical lens; this is a lens that challenges domination, encourages thoughtful questions, and recognizes that people operate with values and cultural assumptions that are informed by historical and sociopolitical contexts.

-Silvia Cristina Bettez

Building Critical Communities Amid the Graduate Classroom. Review of Education, Pedagogy, and Cultural Studies. 2011

1. Take time to reflect: Recognize your position, needs and goals.
2. Create community commitments
3. Scaffold effective and active participation
4. Explain your goals, what you are doing (and why)—then repeat
5. Build in mechanisms to learn about the students' experience

1. Take time to reflect: Recognize your position, needs and goals.

Reflect on your own needs as a learner/participant in the course. Consider your personal triggers and your boundaries as an authority. What do you know you are willing to be flexible about and what will you be unwilling to shift? Be explicit with students about your goals and needs, whether it is sharing a reasonable expectation for turning around feedback or how you prefer to be contacted.

2. Create Community Commitments

It is a myth that a group can monitor itself or you alone “set the tone.” Involve students in creating/discussing “norms for engagement.” It is not only that you set the “ground rules” but that each person plays an important role in shaping what happens, what is learned, and how it goes—for the group as a whole. If you aren't comfortable asking students to create community commitments from scratch, consider bringing to class a series of expectations that you begin and present to the class for review and revision (i.e. expectations for me, expectations for you, expectations for the group). Taking a few minutes (or longer) at the start of the class, and revisiting these commitments later in the semester can make a big difference in the quality of the course experience for all.

3. Scaffold effective and active participation

Help students to understand what effective/active participation looks like and scaffold their efforts to engage and to make progress. Point out to students when you appreciate their participation, particularly in the first few weeks. Yes, students may participate differently. But it is not ok for only some to participate. Try:

- a. Minute papers- these are quick writing assignments, often at the beginning of class, to have students reflect on what they read to “warm up” for discussion. Sometimes they are offered at the end of class as a way to write down participation when not everyone has had a turn to

Speak.

- b. Turn to your neighbor: this is also called think, pair, share. Students can reflect individually, then turn to a partner and share their observations. Then the students can be asked to share from the pair to the larger class discussion. This can be less intimidating for some students, to share what the pair discussed then vocalizing what the individual student was thinking.
- c. Participation cards: In some classes, the professor provides two (or more) cards which a student waves or presents to have a turn. This can be useful for professors who want a more visible or equal participation distribution, where everyone must participate at least twice before getting more turns.
- d. Two comments and a question: A professor can assign all students to bring comments and questions to class with them based on the reading. This can equalize the discussion for students who find it challenging to generate comments on the spot, and can allow a professor to more easily “cold call” a student without fear the student is unprepared.

4. Explain your goals, what you are doing (and why). Repeat.

Surface expectations/processes/goals and make them transparent. What are you expecting of students in an assignment? In course participation? In group work? Being explicit or transparent is not about constraining the student, but helping them to tune into you, the group, and their own learning. Often students find it helpful when the class surfaces a disciplinary method or the professor offers a reasoning for why they are utilizing a particular discussion format.

Content warning: Another form of expectation setting. Use content warnings (rather than trigger warning) to inform students about what they will be encountering. We can't predict what material will be sensitive for which students so cover your bases and provide previews frequently, not just when you feel something might be an issue.

5. Build in mechanisms so you can learn about the student experience in your class.

Share that you are a learner and seek constructive feedback that helps you to make decisions. Structure multiple opportunities in the course for students to provide you information about their experience and learning. Identify a way to convey to students the feedback you receive. Consider what you would/could change based on the feedback, what you won't change and why. Here are a few suggestions:

- a. Rotating office hours: if you have group projects, you might decide to assign these groups to visit you in your office hours on a rotating basis.
- b. Weekly check-ins (written): In some cases it might make sense to ask students to write
- c. Mid-semester evaluation: This is sometimes given to students after the first 3-4 weeks rather than the mid-semester, but the goal is to get a sense of what is going well, what could improve, and their own reflection on their own contributions thus far. Reading through these and reflecting back trends (and any actions you will be taking/requesting from the group) can be very powerful to students, so they feel heard and so you gain their feedback while there is still a chance to clarify or adjust.
- d. One index card at the end of a class: a low-tech way to ask for one thing that is working or one thing that may require attention.
- a. Peer Observation: Ask a colleague to visit you (and you visit them), with a request for specific feedback on something that you want to work on--and share observations together afterwards over coffee

