

Make implicit rules visible to all students



Goal: Academic culture contains many “hidden” or implied expectations for classwork and student behavior that may be clear to some students but not all. Making these expectations more obvious can help level the playing field for all students.

Advantages: Even among those with some understanding, these unwritten rules for academic success can vary by course, by program or by institution, so making them clear is helpful for all of your students.

Strategies

Illuminate the implicit rules for

- student preparation for class
- participation in class
- group work
- office hours

Starting with the syllabus, describe your expectations and explain terms and policies that may have different meanings in other cultures (e.g., what constitutes plagiarism).

Give concrete examples

Before leading class discussion, offer samples of specific phrases that students can use to make their point, to respond to another student, to change the topic, and so on.

Encourage help-seeking

Students may view asking for help as a sign of weakness. Encourage students to view office hours as an opportunity to confirm understanding of course content, learn about helpful resources, clarify expectations for assignments, and explore research opportunities.

Disagreement is okay

Some students may feel that it is disrespectful to challenge authority, whether critiquing a published article or asking questions about a presentation by the instructor. Be explicit about the value we place on a respectful exchange of differing perspectives. Underscore that there is often more than one way to approach a problem or interpret findings and we are eager to hear multiple perspectives. As one example, provide sample phrases that students can use to introduce differing ideas: “*It is possible to approach this problem from another angle*” or “*We might consider an alternate explanation*” or “*I interpreted the issue in a (slightly) different way...*”

Social behavior is part of the equation

Social aspects of common interactions in an academic setting are often unspoken. Students may benefit from guidance on how to write emails to their professors, make an appointment for extra help, interact with other students in labs or study groups. These initial points of contact can have a direct impact on the success of these interactions.

Implementation

- Describe expectations on the syllabus.
- Talk about implicit rules for your course with your students. Give a short presentation and/or distribute a handout.
- Give an assignment that requires meeting with the instructor as a model for office hour meetings.

References

1. Burk JA, Zeman JL, Wulf KA, Robison JE, Dickter CL (2015) Supporting neurological difference on college campuses: The Neurodiversity Initiative at the College of William and Mary. *Presented at the Society for Neuroscience Meeting*. <http://www.wm.edu/sites/neurodiversity/resources/forfaculty/index.php>
2. Deussen, T., E. Autio, B. Miller, A. Lockwood, and V. Stewart (2008). What Teachers Should Know About Instruction for English Language Learners: A Report to Washington State.
3. Burk J and LeBlanc, PH (1993) Implicit Nonverbal Rules in the Classroom: A Study of Gender and Status Differences. Presented at the Annual Meeting of the Speech Communication Association
4. <http://communication.utsa.edu/leblanc/articles/art02.pdf>