Using Ground Rules to Support a Diverse Learning Environment

Establishing ground rules is a strategy for creating a classroom learning environment where students feel safe to express their opinions, learn to listen to and respect others' views, and work toward a common goal of shared knowledge through discussion. Ground rules can help prevent students from speaking disrespectfully and can provide a clear path for teachers to respond to hateful speech and to patterns of speaking too much or not listening well. They can also be a way to teach the values and skills of civil discourse. The ground rules may be a tool to teach students how to listen empathically to opposing views and to state one's own view respectfully and clearly.

- Create a list of rules for the classroom. You may want to reference the many lists of ground rules available online and borrow liberally. Rules may address both what students should actively do and should avoid during discussion.

- Introduce the ground rules early in the semester, preferably in the first days of class. You may want to bring a draft of the rules and involve students in revising the rules for the class. Participating in the creation of the rules gives students an invested reason to abide by the rules and to hold each other accountable to the shared ethos of the class.

- Refer to the ground rules throughout the semester to moderate behavior in discussion and to highlight models of good listening and speaking practices. You may also refer students to the ground rules for any online discussion forums, to remind them that the conventions of civil discourse apply to online behavior as well as in person.

- Consider linking the ground rules to rules of professional practice or professional ethics, if appropriate, to help make these connections apparent to students.

Resources

Brookfield, Stephen, and Stephen Preskill. *Discussion as a Way of Teaching: Tools and Techniques for Democratic Classrooms*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1999.

"Ground Rules." Eberly Center for Teaching Excellence, Carnegie Mellon University.
https://www.cmu.edu/teaching/solveproblem/strat-dontparticipate/groundrules.pdf

"Teaching for Inclusion: Diversity in the College Classroom." Center for Teaching and Learning, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. 19-21.
https://ssw.unc.edu/files/web/pdf/TeachforInclusion.pdf.

For more information or to discuss how you might incorporate these ideas into your courses, contact the Reinert Center at cttl@slu.edu.