

Establishing Policy and Procedure

We often think of a syllabus as a contract—a place to hold every policy, procedure, consequence, exception, and indemnification. But exhaustively articulating policy primes students to litigate on their own behalf, and makes it far less practicable for them to meet expectations. Rather than developing and documenting policies and procedures for every aspect of your course, prioritizing the elements of your classroom that most need standardization will increase the possibility of realizing the learning environment you hope for. Students will be more likely to read, remember, and adhere to your expectations, and when they fail to, you will have clear consequences for non-negotiable violations and the freedom to treat others contextually and with discretion.

As you develop the policy and procedure for a course, first distinguish between the two—a policy guides behavior to create and uphold community norms, and a procedure describes an organizational system for carrying out routine activities such as submitting work, emailing, requesting extensions, or conducting peer review. Then ask yourself what rules and systems need to be in place to best support *all* students learning.

Some ways to establish policy and procedures effectively:

- Consider co-authoring some classroom policy with students in the early days of the semester. (These texts are sometimes called Codes of Engagement.) While you may not want to grant them latitude in all things, allowing them to articulate their own values and needs will encourage them to invest in the shared community of the class—and may mean you do less policing of violation than they do.
- Frame policies as positive statements that define what students *should* do rather than what they're prohibited from doing (the latter might prompt students to explore other gradients of inappropriate behavior). For example, try *Listen when someone else is talking* rather than *No talking out of turn*.
- Choose fewer policies with broader implications to make them easier to follow: *Class time is for class activities* is more actionable in practice than *Be on time. No texting. No leaving the room without permission*.
- State broad classroom procedures on the syllabus, but explain those specific to an assignment or activity when you distribute directions and prompts.
- Be realistic about your own habits and needs, and develop procedures that support you in your teaching. The more independent your students can be in, say, submitting work so as to facilitate your timely and engaged response, the better for you all.

References

- Heppner, Frank. *Teaching the Large College Class: A Guidebook for Instructors with Multitudes*. San Francisco: John Wiley and Sons, 2007.
- MacGregor, Jean. *Strategies for Energizing Large Classes: From Small Groups to Learning Communities*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000.

See also

Building Classroom Community
Fundamentals of Syllabus Design
Inclusive Pedagogy