

Establish and communicate clear standards and expectations

“I don’t know what I’m supposed to do!” “Why do we need to learn this?” These types of student laments can be very frustrating for instructors to hear and to acknowledge. At the same time, such statements underscore why it is critical for instructors to establish and communicate clear course standards and expectations to their students at the outset of and throughout the term.

COMMUNICATING EXPECTATIONS AROUND COURSEWORK

Certainly, students need to understand what is expected of them to thrive and succeed. As Collier and Morgan have suggested, “students’ success in college depends not only upon their explicit understanding of course content but also their implicit understanding of how to demonstrate that knowledge in ways that will satisfy each professor’s expectations. Hence even when two students have an equivalent mastery of the explicit content of their coursework, the one who has a better understanding of their professors’ implicit expectations will be more likely to succeed.”¹⁷ However, faculty expectations about coursework and students’ understanding of those expectations are not always aligned.¹⁸ Students who did not encounter similar expectations of how to demonstrate their knowledge in past educational settings may require instructors to clearly state their expectations.

This disconnect between faculty and student expectations and the impact of that disconnect on students’ success can be explained by the “hidden curriculum” present within every course. The hidden curriculum, a term first coined in the 1970s in response to the broad and unmitigated structural racial, gender, and social inequities in education, refers to the difference between the curriculum as designed and the curriculum in action.¹⁹ Sambell and McDowell define the construct as “what is implicit and embedded in educational experiences in contrast with the formal statements about curricula and the surface features of educational interaction.”²⁰ The hidden curriculum can present disproportionate barriers to some students due to their lived experiences and educational backgrounds. However, the hidden curriculum can be mitigated, Semper and Blasco argue, when instructors acknowledge their assumptions and reflect on how their own lived experiences and knowledge might inform their curricula and how there may be differences between their stated and assumed expectations.²¹

“I was premed and it was just jarring being in those classrooms. I did science pretty well in high school, so it’s just like a shock: the expectations, knowing how to study for it, knowing what was expected of me. The shock of being one of the few people of color in a large room. It was all of that.”

(Senior Focus Group, Northwestern Black Student Experience Report)

Establishing and communicating expectations for students is essential. The first step is to align those expectations with thoughtful learning outcomes, teaching methods, and assessments.²² As they think through their curricular, pedagogical, and teaching choices, inclusive instructors reflect critically on their rationale for each and make that rationale transparent to their students.²³ Even the most experienced instructors can benefit from probing their own thinking: “Why do I give two exams and assign a final paper?” If the answers are like these—“Because that’s what I did as an undergraduate” or “That’s what everyone else does in my department”—then instructors should probably rethink how the activity fits, or does not fit, with their learning outcomes. Working through the rationale will make it easier to explain choices and decisions to students and therefore help lessen the impact of the hidden curriculum. It will also signal to students the value and purpose of different activities and tasks, which may not have been transparent to the student otherwise. Inclusive instructors then communicate these expectations without assuming prior understanding on syllabi as well as through additional methods, such as rubrics for assignments and oral instructions in class.

COMMUNICATING EXPECTATIONS AROUND CLASSROOM INTERACTIONS

Crafting communal guidelines or ground rules with students can help them develop a shared understanding about how to communicate with one another in both large- and small-group settings. Creating ground rules for constructive dialogue is also a pedagogical strategy that has been used to protect both students and instructors from adverse and potentially hurtful interactions in class.²⁴ Being transparent about why these guidelines matter is important as well. Inviting students to discuss the qualities and behaviors that will create a respectful, inclusive, and engaging learning environment, even in a class that is not discussion based, will do much to foster “purposeful and substantive interactions among students.”²⁵ Statements about respectful communication can also be included on the syllabus and in handouts related to specific assignments. These statements and ground rules make expectations for classroom interactions explicit to all students regardless of past experience.

TEACHING STRATEGIES

1. **Reflect critically on what you want your students to be able to do, know, and value** by the end of the course and explain why this matters. Explicitly identify relevant skills, behaviors, and attitudes on syllabi and in class. Explain the rationale and purpose behind teaching activities and assignments. Communicate what course content has been included and why.
2. **Examine the syllabus for what may be getting communicated to students.** What is the tone of the syllabus, and does it match your tone in class? Does the syllabus come across as authoritarian and rigid? Easy-going and flexible? Friendly and approachable? For some students, there can also be confusion between the instructor’s words in class and what is stated in the syllabus.
3. **Avoid assumptions about students’ prior understanding, in terms of both foundational knowledge and tasks.** Asking students to write a literature review, for example, might look very different in different fields. Offer clarifying details or examples.
4. **Create communal guidelines on the first day of class.** Ask your students, in small groups or pairs, how you should interact with one another and how you can create a respectful and inclusive learning environment. Add these guidelines to the syllabus or course website and reinforce them.
5. **Communicate expectations about what it means to participate in discussion,** whether in small or large groups or in face-to-face or online environments, especially if there is a grade attached to participation. Explain how you assess participation, including, for example, expectations about quality, frequency, and length.
6. **Clarify assessment criteria.** How exactly will students’ work be assessed? Each assignment should have criteria provided to students ahead of time. Aim for formative feedback to be timely, clear, and constructive and focus on the students’ work. Northwestern instructors can learn more about equitable assessment and alternative strategies for grading through the open educational resource on [reimagining assessment](#).
7. **Communicate a balance of rigor and empathy in both words and actions**—students should be held to high but achievable standards.

EXAMPLE

On the first day of class, the instructor tells her students, “This is not going to be a course where I just give you information and you write down what I say. In this class, we are going to engage in activities, both individually and in small groups, that will help develop your critical thinking, cultivate empathy and perspective, and collaborate effectively in teams. At the end of the term, you will have completed three projects that deliberately build on each other, each focusing on a core concept we are discussing in this class, and which will help achieve the learning objectives.” After she communicates key aspects and themes of the course, providing her rationale for selecting different texts and materials, she then breaks the students into small groups to get to know one another and to develop ground rules for working in teams and full-class discussion. The full class reconvenes to cocreate expectations. To put these ground rules into immediate practice, she forms triads in which students review the syllabus, noting any questions or points of confusion they might have about assignments, course policies, or how to engage with the instructor and the TAs.

FURTHER READING

“DEI Syllabus Statements.” *Searle Center for Advancing Learning and Teaching*. Northwestern University, 2023.

Goldstein, S. B. (2021). “Ground rules for discussing diversity: Complex considerations.” In M. E. Kite, K. A. Case, & W. R. Williams (Eds.), *Navigating difficult moments in teaching diversity and social justice* (pp. 17-29). American Psychological Association.

Sandoval-Lee, E. Y. & Womack, V. Y. (with contributions from Calkins, S.). (2023). “In brief: Revealing the hidden curriculum of our courses.” *Searle Center for Advancing Learning and Teaching Guide*. Northwestern University.

Watts, G. W., Garfield, T. A., & Davis, M. T. (2023). “Experiences, supports, and strategies of first-generation college students.” *College Teaching*, 71(1), 38-48.