

H-12: Guideline for setting ground rules

Guide for Setting Ground Rules

Whenever you hope to facilitate conversations on multicultural issues, whether preparing for a one-hour workshop or weaving such discussions into a yearlong class, a vital first step is the development of guidelines for participation. These guidelines, often referred to as "ground rules," should provide the community within a workshop or class a frame to ensure open, respectful dialogue, and maximum participation.

Generating a List of Ground Rules

There are several effective ways to create ground rules. If time is an issue, as it tends to be in short workshops of one to two hours, it may be necessary for you to simply list the ground rules for the group. Be sure to inquire whether the ground rules are agreeable, and mention that if you had more time together, you would have preferred the group to generate the list.

A second way to create ground rules is to list those rules you commonly use, then ask for additional ground rules from the participants. When somebody proposes a ground rule, ask the other participants if they agree to it. If most do, add it to the list.

The best way to create ground rules, if you have the time, is to allow the participants to generate the entire list. Ask them to think about what they, as individuals, need to ensure a safe environment to discuss difficult and controversial issues. If the participants are having difficulty coming up with ground rules, or if they do not come up with a particular ground rule you feel is important to the success of your facilitation, try to prompt them toward it. If they still do not mention it, you can add it to the list.

Examples of Widely Used Ground Rules

Ground rules should be developed and adapted for every unique context. Appropriate ground rules may depend partially on age, region, social class, and other contextual factors. The following list of common ground rules from multicultural education classes and workshops should serve only as a starting point for your process of creating a similar list suitable to your own situation:

1. Listen actively -- respect others when they are talking.
2. Speak from your own experience instead of generalizing ("I" instead of "they," "we," and "you").
3. Practice timely attendance.
4. Do not be afraid to respectfully challenge one another by asking questions, but refrain from personal attacks -- focus on ideas.
5. Participate to the fullest of your ability -- community growth depends on the inclusion of every individual voice.
6. Instead of invalidating somebody else's story with your own spin on their experience, share your own story and experience.
7. The goal is not to agree -- it is about hearing and exploring divergent perspectives.
8. Be conscious of body language and nonverbal responses -- they can be as disrespectful as words.

It is also important to set a ground rule for how participation will be managed. Do you prefer for participants to raise their hands and be called on, or for people to speak freely? Remember that some people -- especially those who tend to be introverted -- need more time to process thoughts and speak; so the latter option may exclude them from the discussion. Still, the formal process of raising hands to be recognized may detract from the collective atmosphere needed to discuss multicultural issues.

Strategies and Notes

1. It is very helpful to post the ground rules somewhere visible during the entire course of a class or workshop. Some teachers and facilitators who are with a certain group over an extended period of time will bring the list of ground rules (on news print or some other transportable medium) back to the group for every session or class period. They can then refer back to the list when they sense that participants are failing to sufficiently follow one or more of the items.
2. Challenge the participants on the ground rules early and often. If you do not set a tone of strict adherence to the items early in the process, it may become impossible to enforce them later.
3. If you are using more than two or three ground rules, try focusing on particular items during appropriate activities or discussions. For example, if you are facilitating a discussion in a large group, state before the discussion starts that you would like to focus on active listening. Challenge participants to refrain from any side discussions. The same can be done if you are facilitating an experiential activity, by introducing it as a "silent" activity.
4. You must MODEL these ground rules in your own participation. This is especially true for an item such as #2 (speak from your own experience). Be sure that your own language reflects ownership and responsibility by using as many "I" and "me" statements as possible.
5. If a particular ground rule is routinely broken, bounce it back to the participants. A fruitful discussion can often arise from a close examination of why the participants are not adhering to particular items.
6. Revisit the ground rules occasionally, and if time allows, ask whether the participants would like to add any new items.

Rethinking Ground Rules

If a goal of multicultural education is to challenge current structures and assumptions about educational engagement, we must look closely at all guidelines we use in our classes and workshops, asking ourselves who they support and who, if anybody, they privilege. As such, many multicultural educators and facilitators have begun to rethink the idea of ground rules and ways they are currently implemented.

Recent critical analysis of common ground rules have resulted in a collective reconsideration of their role. This is because too often, ground rules that are put in place, whether by an educator/facilitator or by participants, privilege the already-privileged groups in a given dialogue. For example, in a dialogue about race, white participants will often support ground rules meant to keep anger out of the discussion--ground rules focused on a Eurocentric idea of respect. When we consider who is protected by ground rules like "attack the idea, not the person," it becomes apparent that, intentionally or not, they protect the participants representing privileged groups.

While I do not advocate dropping ground rules altogether, I do support the idea of seriously studying these issues and the possible ramifications of ground rules that might ultimately support the status quo by providing safety and comfort for those who, for the sake of their own learning, most desperately need to be made to feel uncomfortable. Consider opening this conversation within your class or workshop or

among colleagues, and challenge yourself to make sure that the discussions and dialogues you are setting up do not further oppress historically oppressed people