

Creating Safe Spaces in a Virtual Community

How to Develop Online Classroom Norms

From Nancy Steineke, author of *Classroom Management: Strategies for Achievement, Cooperation, and Engagement*.

A Note
from
Nancy Steineke



NOW THAT SOME OF US ARE HEADING BACK INTO THE VIRTUAL CLASSROOM WORLD,

we have the chance to build upon the previous spring's distance learning experiences. Many teachers found that getting a class discussion off the ground was harder online than in person, or that students were less likely to share ideas in a virtual classroom. One of the things to consider as we return to (or face the possibility of returning to) online learning is class norms. Co-created, relevant classroom norms establish a safe space for students. If those norms were interrupted during the sudden transition to distance learning, it's no wonder that students, particularly those in middle and high school, might be reluctant to share ideas or even join a virtual classroom. Therefore, at the top of our online teaching list, there needs to be an explicit and ongoing discussion of how to create a safe virtual classroom.

Before school starts, determine what tools you will be using for student interaction and consider how to gradually increase the opportunity for interaction as community is built. When you introduce a new mode of communication, such as a class chat or videoconference, first ask your students: What would you need from others in order to feel comfortable participating in this online forum? Then share these ideas with the class.

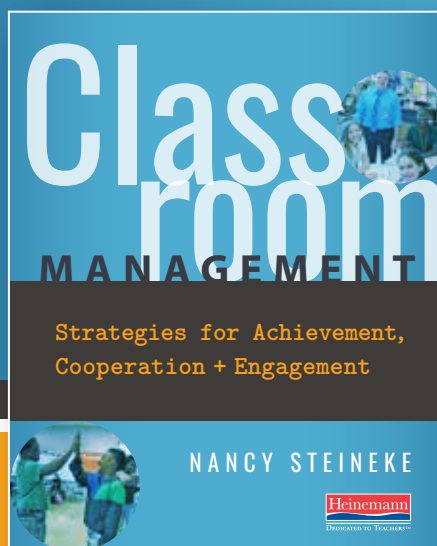
Then with their comments in mind, try having a technology run through with students on the platform. As you meet, help students become familiar with the platform: what will they see on the screen as they join a meeting or are moved into a breakout group, how to enable audio and video, actions to take if a connection is dropped. Then, ask students how their comments might be condensed into two or three negotiated rules that are always reviewed prior to chatting, meeting, or sharing in order to make others feel safe to join in. For example, in the case of a video meeting:

- Focus on whoever is speaking using positive body language.
- Take turns speaking and speak one at a time.
- Enjoy visiting "live" while abstaining from taking screen shots.

After each meeting, ask students: How did it feel? What would make the next meeting better? It's important that we work with our students to continually improve our interactions on these digital platforms, ever mindful of creating the same respectful safe spaces in a virtual community that we previously aimed for in the physical classroom.

All my best,

Nancy



Learn more about Classroom Management at [Heinemann.com](https://www.heinemann.com).



Connect with Nancy on Twitter @nsteineke.



MOVE> Establish Positive Behavior Norms Collaboratively

Immediate Result: Giving students an opportunity for self-reflection on the very first day enables them to start the year or semester with a clear idea of what success looks like. A first-day prompt that focuses on what matters to students offers yet another way to set a student-centered tone. Also, just a couple of minutes to think and write can have a calming effect on students. (It can also give you the opportunity to calm your own first-day jitters with some cleansing deep breaths since your students' eyes are off you and on their writing.)

Long-Term Result: The piece that students write, though short, offers you a writing sample from each student, something that can inform early instructional decisions. Plus, periodically students can track their own growth by returning to these early thoughts and reflecting upon their contributions to the community.

Make your first assignment something that emphasizes positive norms. This activity, “How Would You Like to Be Remembered?” has proven useful for years in my class and in the classes of my colleagues.

Pass out index cards or half sheets of paper to students. Ask them to put their name at the top, and then pose this prompt or project it on the board:

Since you'll be working with a variety of people over the school year, how will you consistently make a good first impression? What will you do? How will you act? What will you say? How do you want to be remembered? Take a minute to jot down some ideas that come to mind. Make a list. Don't worry about using complete sentences or correct spelling. Just get your ideas down on the card. For example, I might write down . . . “friendly, organized, helpful.”

If some students remind you that they already know everybody and that the impressions are already made, just remind them that this is a new year, which always offers the opportunity of presenting ourselves in a brand-new light. Give students a quick minute or two to jot a few words and phrases. Then collect the cards and ask students to quietly listen while you read some of their thoughts aloud without mentioning anyone's names. End by showing your faith in the class, perhaps with something like "I can tell this is going to be a great year because all of you are so in tune with how to make a first impression. And this is going to come in handy because in just a few more minutes you'll be working together for real, so don't forget what you wrote down!" And if you run across any "snarky" responses, those students are sending you a strong "I need your attention" message; take heed and work on offering them some custom positive, thoughtful noticings that may help smooth those first-day bristles.

Here's another way to use this activity. Middle school teacher Jenna Leser starts by displaying negative descriptors that most people *wouldn't* want to be remembered for (see Figure 2.12). While the students are writing about how they *do* want to be remembered, Jenna erases the negative words. Once students have some ideas on their cards, Jenna invites students up a row or so at a time to grab a marker and add a positive trait

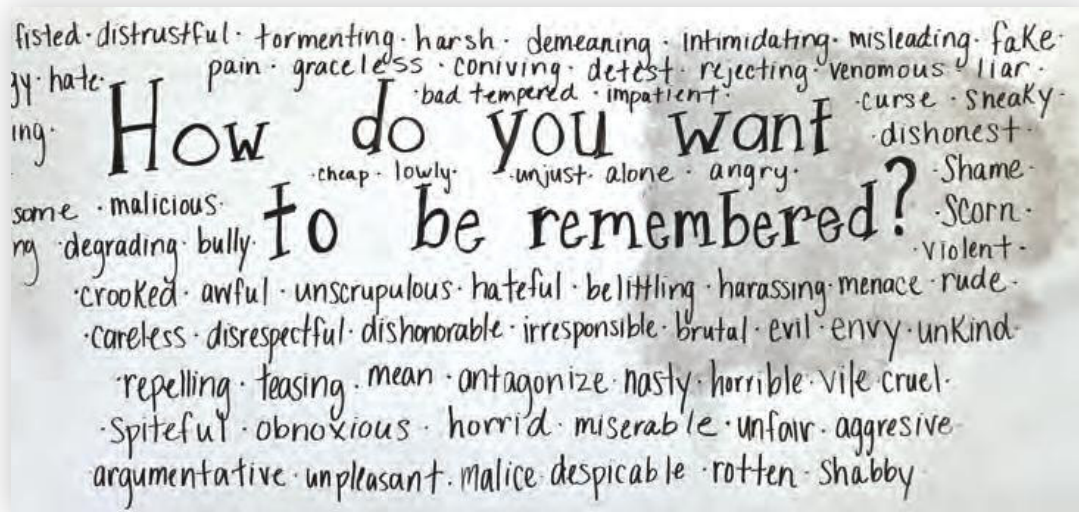


Figure 2.12 When students walk into the room, the board is filled with negative descriptors, words and phrases that students—most likely—would not want to be remembered for.

or two to the board. And then once everyone has contributed, Jenna takes a photo that the class can revisit throughout the year, long after the whiteboard has been erased (see Figure 2.13). What do you do with the cards after that? You could pick a few every day to hold in your hand while greeting students. When a card holder comes by, start up a quick impromptu conversation by asking who inspired them to write down that characteristic. You'll likely get to hear about their coaches, former teachers, parents, relatives, siblings, neighbors. Pretty interesting stuff!

Be sure to save the cards even after you've exhausted their doorway chat potential. Periodically, pass them back to students and have them reflect on their own classroom behavior as it compares to their original first-day thoughts. Are there positive traits they could add that they have expressed when working with others? Are there traits that are pretty important but they've forgotten about? How do they want their classmates to remember them when the year ends, and what are they doing to ensure those positive memories?



Figure 2.13 There are lots of positive ways to be remembered by others!