

How Can We Live Together? Creating a Classroom Constitution

WHAT?

A classroom constitution is intended to be a living document created collaboratively by teachers and students. Displayed prominently in the classroom, it should be revisited frequently for various purposes. For example, a constitution can be used as a focus for weekly class meetings or journal entries about how things are going in the group. It may be a subject for persuasive essays or debates as individuals or small groups see a need for change. Or it may be referred to in settling disputes about behavior or reminding individuals of what they agreed to do.

WHY?

A classroom constitution is meant to spell out the general principles of individual and group rights and responsibilities. Creating a classroom constitution is a good way for a group to build community and participate in a democratic process for organizing classroom life. Like any community, students in a classroom are much more likely to understand and commit themselves to policies and group norms they have helped decide. As school citizens, they also have a democratic right to participate in creating policies and norms that will affect them. When teachers make those decisions entirely by themselves, students often don't feel obliged to honor them.

Collaboratively creating a classroom constitution does not end all classroom conflict any more than simply having a federal constitution guarantees that everyone will follow it. People are always negotiating and re-negotiating how they will get along with each other. But taking the time to create a classroom constitution gives the group a way to get started in which everyone can participate and agree upon.

It is important to remember that a classroom constitution, like a state or federal one, is not meant to be a detailed list of rules and regulations. Rather it is a set of principles, general norms, or agreements that a group decides will guide how its members live and learn together. For example, a classroom constitution may say, "The group agrees to meet work responsibilities," but not that "late homework will be not be accepted." The former offers general guidance to the group and can help everyone think about things like late homework. But the latter is a specific behavior rule that may have so many exceptions as to render it meaningless in a constitution.

HOW?

The process of creating a classroom constitution should begin with a whole group discussion of what makes for a successful classroom community. The discussion can be built around questions like these:

- When you think of really good classrooms you've been in during your school years, what were they like?
- How did people get along in those classrooms? How did they work together?
- We're going to be together all year; what do you think it will take for us to get along and work well together?

Following that discussion, there are several ways of actually creating a classroom constitution and lots more could be invented. Here are three variations.

Variation 1. Prior to student work on the constitution, the teachers write down on a large piece of newsprint what they believe they need to have a good classroom environment that supports powerful learning and collaborative living. Each student is asked to individually write down what they think makes for a good learning and living environment in the classroom. They then are placed in small groups of three or four and asked to come up with a single list by finding common or shared items. These lists are put on large sheets of newsprint and placed on the wall. A single whole group list is then created by finding common items across all the group lists. The whole-group student list is then placed next to the teacher list and the whole group – teacher(s) and students – looks for common items and negotiates differences between the two lists. The result is a single list of items that teacher(s) and students agree will make for powerful learning and collaborative living – a “classroom constitution.”

Tip: When bringing lists together in student groups or between students and teacher(s), remember that a unique item found on only one list could still be adopted by the group if enough people agree that they would like it included. In other words, any group could argue for an item that appears only on their list and not on others.

Variation 2. A second variation generally follows the first one but the teachers do not make any prior list for themselves. Instead they focus their efforts on facilitating students through the process of creating a constitution. In this case, the same process is used for students to move from individual lists of ideas to small groups agreements to whole group consensus. As the group lists are brought together, the teacher(s) may ask questions about how ideas might look in practice or remind students of general school policies that could override one or another part of the proposed constitution.

Tip: Students are very good at seeing through “fake” democracy. When asking clarifying questions or reminding about general school policies the emphasis should be on thinking

things through or checking them out: “That idea might contradict a rule for the whole school. Can someone check that out to make sure before we finalize it.” If the teacher(s) simply overrule student ideas, students will quickly lose interest in the process and trust in the teachers.

On the other hand, the teacher does have an obligation to intervene at the end of the process if there are items that might interfere with equity or fairness in the community. For example, if an item suggested that students might have to bring resources from home or take on after-school responsibilities, the teacher should ask whether the group has considered that some students might not be able to do so. This kind of guided reflection is a check on democratic principles rather than leading the group toward a hidden plan or agenda.

Variation 3. A third variation builds on either of the first two and extends the process into learning about the US Constitution. Once the whole group has reached consensus on ideas to be included in the classroom constitution, the teacher(s) introduces the federal constitution and leads a discussion about similarities between the two. Then small groups are formed to rewrite the classroom constitution in a format like the federal version with each group taking one or two items from the classroom list and turning them into a “Bill of Rights”

Tip: The third variation offers a good way to help students get an idea of how the federal constitution is organized as well as its contents. As the year progresses the classroom constitution can also be “amended” to include new norms or ideas, or parts repealed or revised if need be.

Whatever process is used to create a constitution, it should end with a signing ceremony. Once the contents are agreed upon, the constitution is written on a large piece of newsprint and everyone in the group – teachers and students – is asked to sign. Other adults who may work with the group during the year should also be invited to sign: administrators, guidance counselors, etc.

Tip: If a large number of people refuse to sign then the group needs to review the contents and the process used to reach consensus, and perhaps even restart the process. What if one or two students refuse to sign? That’s a question for the group to consider and a great opportunity to explore issues having to do with the rights of individuals in groups and communities.

SO WHAT

We are living in a time when constitutions are a hot topic. In many places around the world new countries are emerging and new constitutions for them are being created. Where these already exist human and civil rights groups are demanding that they be honored in protesting tyrannical governments. In the US, heated political debates call

forth questions about what the constitution says or implies about the power of the government, civil rights, church and state relations, reproduction rights, and more.

Helping students understand what federal constitutions are and what they are for is an important part of understanding politics and events at all levels of government from global to local. Creating a classroom constitution can help young people see how constitutions are living documents created by real people through negotiation and compromise. They can also see how the language of a constitution is meant as a guide to governance, rather than a detailed list of rules, and thus how its meaning is constantly debated and re-negotiated.

Sample: From Brodhagen, Barbara. 1995. "The Situation Made Us Special." In M. Apple and J. Beane, Democratic Schools, Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, p. 83-4.

Room 201/202 Constitution

We the class of Rooms 201/202, in order to form the best class possible, pledge to live by the following statements:

- We appreciate our individual differences. We recognize that each person is unique.
- All individuals will be treated with respect and dignity. There is no room for put-downs in our room.
- We will be honest with one another in order to build trust.
- We will learn to resolve conflicts, which may involve learning to live with nonresolution.
- Each person will truly listen to every other person.
- We will cooperate and collaborate with one another.
- Learning will be meaningful.
- We recognize that people learn in different ways.

- Assignments, field trips, hands-on experiences will be varied so that everyone can and will learn. If everyone tries, we ALL will succeed.
- Having fun will naturally become part of our experiences.
- All individuals will be organized and on time.
- We will respect the right to pass (not take a turn).

We agree to abide by these truths to the best of our abilities, both as unique individuals and as a cooperative and collaborative community.

Sample contributed By Mark Springer, Radnor Middle “School Soundings” Program

SOUNDINGS VI CONSTITUTION

We the students of the sixth Soundings class, in order to form a more perfect learning environment, establish justice, insure a safe learning community, provide for a sense of respect, promote responsibility, and secure the rights and privileges of Soundings students, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the Soundings community of 2004 and 2005.

The members of the sixth Soundings class have the right and responsibility to do their best to help the Soundings community work together. Members have the responsibility and right to ask questions, debate to reach a consensus, strive to achieve daily, weekly, and yearly goals, contribute ideas to discussions, be respectful to others and to their environment, and to help the Soundings environment run smoothly. Students must not abuse these rights and privileges and must not keep other members from exercising these rights.

Soundings is a democratic classroom. In order to keep this privilege, students must contribute their ideas and help plan. If students are respectful of their responsibilities and obligations, they may exercise the following privileges: to eat in the classroom, to play educational games during breaks, to debate and to reach a consensus, to have their voice heard, and to be a part of the Soundings experience.

Soundings students are given certain rights that shall not be abused by any individual, whether teacher or student. These rights will help improve the learning experience for all members of the class.

Soundings students have the right to...

- ...work in a group or as an individual.
- ...be respected and accepted as an individual.
- ...participate in class and to share ideas.
- ...be listened to.

- ...be supported.
- ...set goals and to do their best to achieve them.
- ...set aside time for research.
- ...depend on each other for support and for help with projects.
- ...disagree and to debate to reach a consensus.
- ...choose how to meet challenges.
 - ... have their ideas heard and respected by others.

We Sign Our Constitution

Barbara L. Brodhagen

Excerpted from “The Situation Made Us Special” (pp. 83-100). In M. Apple and J. Beane, Democratic Schools, Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development 1995.

The 7th grade classroom was alive with excitement and anticipation, students stretching their necks to try to look out the doorway. "Here he comes, " somebody said. Students quickly composed themselves, and all eyes were on the principal as he entered the room. Acting as spokesperson for the class, one student said, "Mr. Principal, you have been asked here today to witness the reading and signing of our classroom constitution. " One voice began as 55 others joined in:

We, the class of Rooms 201/202 at Marquette Middle School, in order to form the best class possible, pledge to live by the following statements:

- We appreciate our individual differences. We recognize that each person is unique.
- All individuals will be treated with respect and dignity.

There is no room for put-downs in our room.

- We will be honest with one another in order to build trust.

- We will learn to resolve conflicts, which may involve learning to live with nonresolution.
- Each person will truly listen to every other person.
- We will cooperate and collaborate with one another
- Learning will be meaningful.
- We recognize that people learn in different ways.
- Assignments, field trips, hands-on experiences will be varied so that everyone can and will learn. If everyone tries, we ALL will succeed.
- Having fun will naturally become part of our experiences.
- All individuals will be organized and on time.
- We will respect the right to pass (not take a turn).

We agree to abide by these truths to the best of our abilities, both as unique individuals and as a cooperative and collaborative community.

One young person began to clap, and soon there were cheers and more applause for all of us, and each of us, and what we had done. The principal said some appropriate and encouraging words and left. We were a group of people, young adolescents and adults, who had just publicly stated agreement to all that was in our constitution, and each of us would try to honor its content to the best of our ability.