

# Establishing Class Norms That Promote Learning

By Stephen L. Chew(<https://www.teachingprofessor.com/author/tp-chew/>) | March 18, 2024

In 1936, psychologist Muzafer Sherif reported a landmark study on the creation of social norms. Sherif made use of an optical illusion called the *autokinetic* (<https://indianapublicmedia.org/amomentofscience/autokinetic-effect.php>) effect (<https://skybrary.aero/articles/autokinetic-effect>). When people view a stationary pinpoint of light in a dark environment, they will perceive the light to move in random directions. For example, on a dark night, if you look at a single star, it will start to appear to move. Sherif put subjects in a darkened room with a single point of light and had them report the light's movement. Participants were alone, with another person, or with two other people. When subjects were alone, their perceptions of the illusory movement varied considerably. When, however, they were part of a group and reporting their perceptions aloud, the group quickly converged on a common judgment of the light's path. Furthermore, when subjects who were part of a group were subsequently tested individually, they maintained the norms established by the group.

Social norms are socially derived standards for what is acceptable and unacceptable behavior within a group. For every group we belong to, there are behaviors that the group deems appropriate and worthy and others that the group finds unsuitable and objectionable. These norms regulate our behavior when we are part of a group. Sherif's study revealed several important characteristics about how norms come about. Norms arise even in small groups of two or three and even when other group members are strangers we likely will never meet again. Norm formation is fast and, once a norm takes hold, it affects our behavior even when we are apart from the group. Finally, norm formation does not require conscious negotiation or communication, we establish norms simply by interacting with

others. When you are at a social gathering with people you don't know, there are probably topics of conversation that you won't bring up until you are sure it is acceptable within the group, and if you aren't certain what the appropriate behavior might be, you look to others to try to discern the norm for proper behavior.

Research on social norms applies directly to the classroom. When a class meets for the first time, whether online or in person, social norms form quickly among students and without conscious deliberation. Some norms are helpful for academic success, such as students' asking questions, and some are counterproductive, such as students' spending class time texting and checking social media. Once in place, the norms are hard to change. Teachers must work to influence the norms established in each course they teach, and they need to start on the first day of class to have the best chance of doing so.

Here are some norms worth pursuing:

- **In this class, you will learn interesting and important information.** On the first day of class, teachers should present some course related information that most students will find interesting and useful. Ideally, it should be counterintuitive, surprising, and thought provoking. Paul Hanstedt captures this idea in his column **"On the First Day of Class, Begin with Intrigue (<https://www.teachingprofessor.com/topics/preparing-to-teach/on-the-first-day-of-class-begin-with-intrigue/>)."** He suggests starting the first class with a "beautiful problem" for students to discuss that will evoke their curiosity. In his general education humanities courses, he starts with a work of art or a poem. Students may not know enough to see the beauty in the work, but when he helps them see the beauty, students learn about the work, they learn about him, and they learn what he can teach them. During the first class period, I always give a mini-lecture on what psychology is and how it differs from common sense. I warn students ahead of class that I will lecture and they should come prepared to take notes. I establish the norm of substantive learning on the first day. I don't lecture the whole class period. Students are still transitioning to college, and I don't want to establish the norm that I will **overwhelm them** (<https://www.teachingprofessor.com/topics/professional-growth/less-is-more-slown-down-to-uncover-depth-in-teaching/>). Students should learn to expect that when they attend class, they will learn important and useful information, and that attending class is one of the best and easiest ways to learn that information.
- **I am here to help you learn and succeed.** The teacher should establish themselves as a partner in helping students learn and succeed. If students see the teacher as an obstacle to successfully completing the course,

then neither the students nor teacher are likely to find the course a positive learning experience. Creating a norm of a supportive learning environment can start with a greeting from the instructor before the course begins. The syllabus can also emphasize positive expectations that the professor will help students who put in the right kind and amount of effort every chance to succeed. Students should see the teacher as trustworthy and approachable.

- **While class is going on, we stay engaged in learning.** Establish a class norm of engaged learning, which I readily admit is easier said than done. Establish a pace and level of detail for the class so that students feel they have to pay attention or risk missing important information. They should feel slightly rushed in their ability to keep up with class presentations. Too often I've seen teachers who meander through a topic without clear organization and go off on tangents of interest only to themselves. When students perceive that nothing of importance or value is on offer, they will initiate off-task activities. An engaging presentation is well organized, concise, and to the point, with plenty of opportunities for review and formative assessment.
- **You are encouraged to speak up in class.** On the first day of class, the teacher should establish the norm that students speak up in class to contribute or ask questions. If the teacher does not promote the norm of speaking up, then they are furthering the norm of staying silent. A teacher can't go through the first few classes without giving students any chance to speak and then expect them to immediately feel comfortable contributing and asking questions. On the first day, the teacher should have an activity that encourages students to speak up in class, such as a think-pair-share. The activity should have some relevance to the class, but more importantly, it should be one that all students can participate in—"When you think of psychology, what is the first thought that comes to mind?" or "Did you have a favorite poem growing up?" or "Think of ways that chemistry impacts your life," for example.
- **This class is a community, and you are a member.** A great deal of research shows the positive influence of a sense of community and belonging on student motivation and success (e.g., Shea et al., 2006). This is especially true in online courses and likely became even more important during remote learning early in the pandemic. A sense of community occurs when students see themselves in fellowship with other class members due to common experiences and goals. Belonging means that students feel like fully accepted and respected members of the community. They identify with being part of the class and enjoy talking about the class with other members. At the beginning of a course, give students a chance to meet and talk to each other to start building community. For example, in my general psychology class, which consists mostly of first-year students, I have

them do a series of think-pair-share activities early in the semester. I tell them to introduce themselves to the people they pair with. In later activities, I tell them to pair with someone they haven't met yet. At the beginning of the semester, I assign members of the class to small groups. I give them discussion assignments, but I also encourage them to rely on the groups if they need help from other class members. Have students carry out tasks that are distinctive to your section of the course.

We tend to think of differences among students in terms of personality traits. Some are more talkative and likely to ask questions, and some are more studious and serious about learning. We often fail to appreciate the power of the social context within any group, including our classes. Students may be active and engaged participants in one class but passive note-takers in another. They may seek out the professor with questions in one class but feel it isn't worthwhile in another. Social norms influence how students act in our classes.

## References

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