

Should groups set their own norms? Maybe not



BY JOYCE LIN AND AYANNA PERRY

When a new community forms, whether it's an elementary school class or a teacher inquiry group, co-constructing norms or community expectations is often one of the members' first tasks. The common rationale for this approach is that it builds community and creates buy-in (Allen & Blythe, 2015; Lakey, 2010).

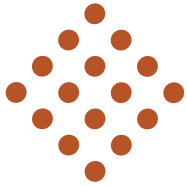
Although we don't disagree with the value of those benefits, our work in cultivating learning communities of beginning high school math and science teachers has shown us that

the co-construction approach can also be challenging and problematic because it typically generates norms consistent with dominant perspectives and cultures. We advocate that norms should be given to (rather than created by) a newly formed community to elevate the different needs, goals, and perspectives of all team members, including those who feel marginalized.

This is the approach we take in the Knowles Teacher Initiative, where we work with beginning high school math and science teachers to examine their teaching practices. Our teaching fellows, who participate in a

five-year program of mentoring and coaching plus financial support and membership in our national network, come to us with a range of educational backgrounds and varied beliefs, values, and expectations about teaching and learning.

With such diverse perspectives, we believe it is important to provide a set of consistent norms at the beginning of their fellowship experience and then help the fellows understand what these norms mean and look like in action, and how they build, support, and protect an inclusive learning community for the whole cohort. In



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this article, we explain our rationale behind our approach and present the norms we've given our fellows.

WHY COLLABORATIVE NORMS CAN BE PROBLEMATIC

Norms are a set of assumptions or guidelines that define what constitutes appropriate or inappropriate behavior and that explain what actions are helpful or detrimental (National School Reform Faculty, 2014; Allen & Blythe, 2015). Norms can help create consistency, foster trust, and lead to openness and collaboration (Breidenstein et al., 2012).

The process through which a group establishes its norms has a large impact on the content of the norms. It also determines — often subconsciously — who the norms protect and serve, and who they don't. Unexamined assumptions about the group's work and its membership operate under the surface and can skew the norms toward the needs and interests of some members more than others.

There are two major assumptions implied when a group collaboratively sets norms before its members have done significant work together. The first assumption is that the definition of appropriate or inappropriate ways of working together accurately reflects the backgrounds and learning needs of all members. But, in truth, how someone acts and what is considered appropriate behavior for a particular setting is determined by social norms and rules that often serve to maintain the comfort

of those who have membership in dominant groups.

A group that hasn't spent time interrogating these underlying social and cultural norms together and getting to know who is in their group (i.e. their identities and experiences) will usually assume community norms that are reflective of dominant culture. Those norms will therefore inherently, if unintentionally, reflect racist, classist, sexist, and ableist ways of existing.

For example, *be respectful* is a common norm that may be well-intentioned. But what does it mean to be respectful, and who gets to decide what is respectful? Without careful interrogation, this norm likely includes "be polite," "don't show emotion," and "avoid conflict," all assumptions of dominant culture's expectations around communication. Therefore, setting norms without an explicit understanding of who its members are (and the goals of the group) will invariably neglect the preferred modes of expression of those who are most disenfranchised.

The second assumption, closely related to the first, is that the norms the group creates will equally protect and support each member. But this is unlikely to be the case if members have different beliefs, values, and ways of interacting with each other. If group members don't know each other, it will be particularly risky for those who have a different perspective from the dominant one and those who don't feel supported to speak up and advocate for themselves.

The most vulnerable members will end up feeling the least protected and their voices will be the least represented in group discussions going forward. This process happens quietly, so the common perception that a lack of dissent when establishing norms means all members feel represented and protected might be far from the truth for some members.

These assumptions are reinforced and perpetuated by the unrealistic timelines groups are often given for setting norms. For example, in the Protocol for Setting Norms (McDonald et al., 2013, p. 22), which asks participants to brainstorm norms and then negotiate the final set as a group, the authors indicate that norm-setting can take "10 minutes or much longer" — a guideline that is vague, at best, and massively underestimated, at worst. A different protocol, Setting Agreements Activity, which asks groups to select and negotiate from a list of 25 norms, allots only 40 minutes for a group of 16 people.

In both protocols, the deceptively simple directions for norm setting coupled with the unrealistic suggestions for how long the process will take imply that norms are quick and easy to form and that members will all have similar understandings. In our experience, this is seldom the case, especially when groups are diverse and members are new to each other. In fact, accepting the assumptions and following these protocol guidelines can potentially harm the group by preventing them

from building a cohesive community for the long term.

OUR EXPERIENCE WITH NORMS AT KNOWLES

In the last four years, as part of our commitment to equity, Knowles Teacher Initiative has shifted away from asking fellows to create their own norms to using preset norms. To improve math and science education for *all* students, much of our work together requires fellows to raise their critical consciousness by exploring how their identity, power, and privilege intersect with larger societal structures and how oppression is enacted in classrooms.

These conversations are emotional and vulnerable, and they must all be guided by norms that create a safe and respectful space for all. Even conversations that seem less risky and difficult (such as what it means for students to engage in Common Core math practices) benefit from these shared norms, as fellows quickly understand that all of our perspectives, even the “objective” ones, are shaped by our identities and the invisible social standards and expectations that uphold the dominant culture.

We do not ask our fellows to construct their own norms because participants begin their fellowship experience with a wide range of awareness, understanding, and language about race, identity, power, and related issues. Many do not know how to engage in these conversations with others in productive ways.

Without this understanding, it is impossible for them to agree on behaviors that lead to productive conversations on these difficult topics. In fact, we have found that, oftentimes, norms that are created by groups without a critical awareness of the ideas that will be discussed and of who is in their group can further marginalize and silence those who are already typically silenced and marginalized in our society.

Instead, we developed norms that could be established with intentionality around race and equity and that can be

more permanent, exist for our fellows outside of specific types of activities, be culture building and setting, project a picture of our/their best selves (as imagined by the facilitators), and allow for inclusive participation in the community.

The norms that we developed are:

1. Impact is greater than intent, so own your impact and examine, investigate, and interrogate your intent.
2. Ask for what you need and tell what you can give.
3. Ask for what others need and what others can give.

Our first community norm about focusing on impact pushes against the commonly adopted norm “assume positive intentions.” Assuming positive intent allows those who have offended to avoid responsibility for inflicting hurt while doing little to absolve the hurt or confusion of the offended (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2014). Further, this norm assumes that the people involved have already built a relationship with enough trust and positive interactions to make it easy for the offended to assume that the intention of the speaker was honest and good.

In contrast, “own your impact” positions the offender as the person with the burden of learning in moments where ignorance has led to offense. The speaker must learn from the exchange that, regardless of the intent, the words he or she spoke or the action/inaction he or she took were hurtful and then examine his or her own identity and culture to find the source of the statement.

Our norm asks speakers to think deeply about the basis of their beliefs and thoughts and recognize that our culture’s social constructs color our language and interactions. Furthermore, it asks speakers to scrutinize their intentions to determine whether they were actually good.

Our second and third norms, “Ask for what you need and tell what you can give” and “Ask what others need and what others can give,” each push

against our societal tendency to be fiercely independent. Instead, these two norms promote a more compassionate and humanistic approach toward connecting with each other, which can create greater community and depth in relationships.

The second norm asks fellows to consider their needs as a part of a group that has the same goals — to improve their teaching practice and support their students — and simultaneously think about what they can contribute to that community. The third norm invites our teachers to ask about the needs and contributions of others as another way to build community.

While it takes time to learn enough about a person to understand or contemplate their needs, asking about the contributions of others requires listening intently to others with a desire to learn from their perspectives and reconsider or augment your worldview, taking into consideration what they have shared. As fellows become more aware of what they and others need and learn to express these needs and requests clearly, we hope that their compassion, empathy, and respect for each other grows.

REACTIONS TO THE NORMS

So far, we have used these norms with three cohorts of fellows. (We’ll call them cohort A, B, and C.) We’ve experienced two different reactions to these norms. Fellows in cohort A and in cohort C have reacted positively. In a recent survey, when fellows from cohort C were asked how the norms helped their group, the most common responses focused on the following:

- **Norms made space for others.**

For example: “I think that we were all able to give each other space and ask for what we needed because we established these norms. A lot of us are ‘shy helpers’ and don’t like asking for what we need, but the ground rules that this is something we must do allowed us to feel less guilty about stepping away or being stricter

about time so that we all had a chance to speak.”

- **Norms allowed fellows to be more vulnerable with each other.** For example: “The norms helped encourage us to be more vulnerable and share our understandings and experiences with each other.”
- **This, in turn, allowed for more open and honest conversations.** For example: “I think having the norms in place has helped us have more honest conversations, which leads to an increase of trust among group members, which leads to richer discussions.”

In a different survey, the vast majority of cohort A fellows agreed that the norms hold them accountable to building an inclusive cohort community individually (93%) and collectively (90%).

In contrast, cohort B members have struggled with the idea of being given a set of norms rather than developing their own. In a recent survey, only a small portion of fellows agreed that the norms hold them accountable to building an inclusive cohort community individually (15%) and collectively (8%).

And surprisingly, only 23% reported understanding how following the norms contributes to the development of an inclusive cohort community. Anecdotally, we have received requests from multiple fellows in cohort B asking why they couldn’t develop their own cohort norms instead.

We have a few hypotheses about what led to these differences. First, because of the pandemic, cohort B has mostly had to build community and work together through a virtual platform. Because patterns of interaction are so different and points of human connection are much fewer in virtual spaces than in-person ones, it is likely that the virtual platform hindered fellows from using the norms to develop a rich community. Looking back, we believe we should

have adapted the norms for virtual collaboration.

Second, when these norms were introduced to cohorts A and C, they were contextualized in identity work. With cohort A, fellows shared aspects of their identity through the different names they have been given or called across their lifetime before the norms were introduced. With cohort C, fellows reflected on differences between how they identified themselves and how others perceived them before discussing how the norms interact with these identities.

Cohort B, in contrast, did not do any identity work before being introduced to the norms. They were asked to share reflections of what the norms meant before being given a norm to specifically model to the cohort. Had we prefaced the introduction of the norms in identity work, we might have been better able to build understanding and buy-in, or at least to address the lack of buy-in. This slight change in design is an interesting, if not completely intentional, way to consider variations in how we introduce the norms.

FURTHER REFLECTION

Cohort B’s data is pushing us to continue reflecting on our approach to providing norms and examining our own assumptions. In the past, when we have asked cohorts to create their own norms, we’ve seen traumatizing impacts on our most vulnerable fellows — a situation we want to avoid at all costs moving forward.

But is there a way to better prepare and support fellows to create their own norms? Should we invite another cohort to try, and, if so, when is the right time? What knowledge does the group need to have (for example, about each other, their strengths and limitations as a group, and the marginalizing experiences colleagues in their group have experienced)? What kind of scaffolds and supports might we need to offer to the process?

These are difficult questions, and we don’t have firm answers. As we continue

to grapple with them, the Knowles staff is using the preset norms ourselves so that we can fully understand how they support collaboration and whether they are inclusive of everyone, not just the majority.

If we desire to build a community where members deeply listen to each other, even though their perspectives are in conflict, we have to ensure that the norms that buttress our community interrupt and question the most privileged perspectives while simultaneously protecting the most vulnerable and marginalized.

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