



Creating an Environment for Learning: Making Your Expectations a Reality

1. DEFINE AND COMMUNICATE YOUR EXPECTATIONS.

HOW TO DEFINE THEM

First, think about the environment you want to have in your classroom, and what your students need to do in order to succeed. Some areas to consider:

- **Behaviors in your classroom** (e.g., arrive on time, come prepared, participate, respect other ideas, etc.)
- **Actions outside of your classroom** (e.g., complete assigned work, attend office hours, etc.)
- **Quality of their work** (e.g., complete solutions, numbered pages, etc.)
- **General college stuff** (e.g., use proper email etiquette, write legibly on tests, etc.)

Before it's too late ...

Be aware that if you choose not to explicitly address your expectations with your students, you will be setting them just the same. It just might not be the way you want. For example, if a student texts in class on the first day and you let it pass, you have just set the expectation to all students that you think texting is an acceptable behavior in your classroom.

Once you have an initial idea of what your expectations might be, go through your list and modify it as necessary to make sure that each expectations is:

- Consequential.** Make sure what you're asking of them actually matters and will benefit them in either the short or the long term. You probably do have good reasons for the things you're asking, but make sure you the reasons are clear in your mind before presenting the expectation to your students.
- Specific.** Your expectations should be specific enough that a student can figure out how to meet them. Don't tell your students to "use appropriate language when you email the professor"; tell them "always address the professor as Dr. Smith, don't use slang, and always include your name and EID at the end."
- Action-oriented.** Your expectations should be something the students can actually do, not vague descriptions about what they should be like. Rather than tell students "I expect you to have good critical thinking skills", try: "I expect you to be able to explain your position with specific reasoning and supporting evidence from legitimate sources."
- Achievable.** Your students need to be capable of doing what you are asking of them. Develop an in-class activity to help students develop the component skills and/or knowledge.
- Measurable.** There must be a way for you to know whether or not a student has met your expectations, so you can take action if they have not. For instance, there is no point in asking students not to think derisive thoughts about their classmates - you have no way to know if this is happening. On the other hand, you can ask them to not outwardly display derision for others, as that is something you can observe.

HOW TO COMMUNICATE THEM

- We recommend describing your expectations in a **discussion section syllabus**, as well as **discussing** them with your students on the first day of class (and when new issues arise).
- Discuss the **reasoning** behind each of your expectations so your students don't think you are being arbitrary or nit-picky. And be prepared for counter arguments—students may have unrealistic ideas of what they are—and are not—capable of doing!

Getting Students on Board

To get more "buy in" from your students, rather than just telling them what you expect, consider involving them in the process of creating expectations. Early in the semester, lead a discussion on what behaviors will help them the most, and what should happen if they don't do them. Provide guidance/prompts if needed. Capture their ideas on the board, and codify them in your discussion section syllabus.



2. HELP YOUR STUDENTS MEET YOUR EXPECTATIONS

It should always be easier to meet expectations than not. So now that you have defined what your expectations are, try to structure your class and activities so that meeting your expectations is the path of least resistance. Some general ideas on how to do this:

- **Commitment:** ask students to commit to meeting specific expectations, verbally or in writing.
- **Structure:** break up difficult tasks/behaviors into smaller, manageable pieces.
- **Accountability:** create consequences for not meeting the agreed upon expectations.

Possibilities:

EXPECTATION	STRATEGY	EXAMPLE
Students will complete some activity outside of class.	Ask students to commit to specifics about when and how they will complete the activity. Imagining the specific details of a future action makes it more likely that it will get done.	<i>To get students to visit a display at a museum outside of class, pass around a sign up sheet with specific times/days, and ask students to sign up for a slot.</i>
Students will participate in class activities (not sit out or be distracted).	Make sure each and every student has something specific to DO and hold them accountable for doing it.	<i>If students are working in small groups, ask each student to complete a worksheet and turn it in to you and/or have each member of the group present a specific aspect of the results of their group efforts.</i>
Students will come to class prepared.	Have first activity of the day dependent upon completing preparations.	<i>If you want your students to completing a reading assignment before class, let them know there will be a brief quiz or writing task related to it in class. Have the quiz/writing task at the beginning of the next class, then either collect the papers or have your students trade and grade them.</i>
Students will get work/studying done on time.	Help students break up work/studying tasks (which are often overwhelming and abstract to students) into manageable pieces, ask them to commit to specific times when they will complete each part.	<i>To help students prepare for an upcoming exam, pass out blank calendar sheets and ask students fill out exactly what they will be doing and when. Ask students to share ideas about the best way to prepare, and how long things will actually take to do.</i>
Students will submit high quality work.	Help them understand what goes into high quality work, with examples and strategies to get there.	<i>To help students write an essay, first show them examples of essays, and explain why they are good. have students look at samples and discuss merits. Talk about the writing process and the steps necessary to achieve good results. Ask students to peer edit each other's work at different stages.</i>



3. BE ASSERTIVE

Students will sometimes push back against your expectations. They might be trying to challenge your authority, or might just be having an off day. Either way, being assertive with your expectations is the best tactic.

However, being appropriately assertive can be a difficult balance to strike. It is very easy to say or do something that is either too passive or too aggressive. If you tend to be passive, you risk having your students walk all over you. If you tend to be aggressive, you risk having your students resent you. Either way, you reduce your effectiveness and/or credibility as a leader in the classroom.

You probably have certain patterns of behavior that come naturally, and if they aren't ideal, it will take a lot of time, patience, and practice to change. But do not despair; you can definitely change if you want to. Here are a few examples. Does anything sound familiar?

Scenario 1: Students were supposed to complete a reading assignment, but most didn't.

PASSIVE	AGGRESSIVE	ASSERTIVE
<p>I hope you all got the reading done. But for those of you who didn't, I'll give you a brief synopsis of what it was all about so we can have a good discussion today.</p> <p><i>Cool, I don't have to do the readings anymore. The TA will just tell me what I need to know.</i></p>	<p>You didn't get the reading done?!? I don't know why you all have so much trouble following instructions. If you guys can't keep up, there's no chance you'll pass this class.</p> <p><i>I tried, but I couldn't get it all done. I feel pretty stupid, what's the point of even trying?</i></p> <p><i>What a jerk.</i></p>	<p>Everyone needs to be able to contribute today, so let's all spend a few minutes reading chapter 2. If you've already done the reading, come up here and talk to me briefly.</p> <p><i>Geez, I don't want this happening again. Next time I'm getting the reading done before class.</i></p> <p><i>I got the reading done. This makes me look good!</i></p>

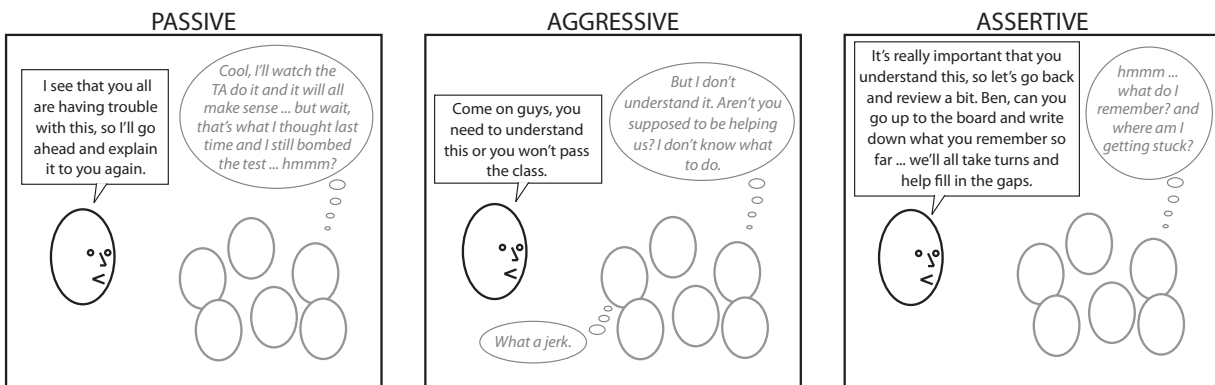
Scenario 2: The TA poses a question to the students, but nobody responds.

PASSIVE	AGGRESSIVE	ASSERTIVE
<p>Nobody knows? Well, the answer is ...</p> <p><i>I'm not answering questions again. Why put myself on the line when I can just wait for the TA to answer?</i></p>	<p>Nobody knows?!? Come on guys, this is really easy, you should all know this.</p> <p><i>But I don't know the answer. This is too hard. Why bother trying?</i></p> <p><i>What a jerk.</i></p>	<p>Nobody knows? Jenny, what's your best guess? ... pretty close, why don't you look in your book, section 4-5, and tell us all what it says.</p> <p><i>Oh, I get it now.</i></p>

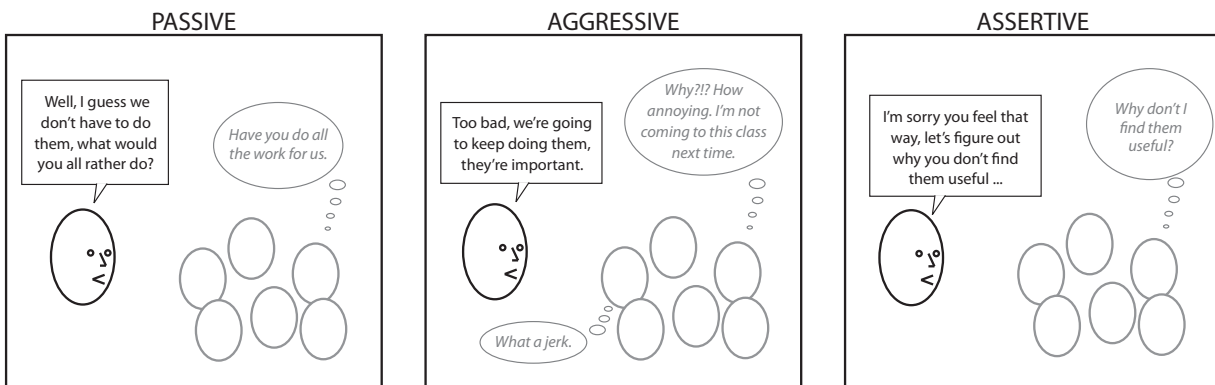
Scenario 3: A student asks if he/she can turn something in late.

PASSIVE	AGGRESSIVE	ASSERTIVE
<p>Um, well, maybe. I can check with the professor, maybe you can get partial credit, I don't know.</p> <p><i>I guess it's no big deal. I'll put off starting it until tomorrow night, that way I can go to that party tonight.</i></p>	<p>Of course not! A due date is a due date. If you don't have it done by Thursday, you will get a zero.</p> <p><i>I don't think I can get it done by then. Maybe I shouldn't even bother, I do have that chemistry test to study for anyway.</i></p> <p><i>What a jerk.</i></p>	<p>You have to turn it in by Thursday to get full credit. But if you turn it in late, I'll still give you feedback on it. This will be critical for you to understand what you need to do for your final project.</p> <p><i>I better try to get it done by Thursday.</i></p>

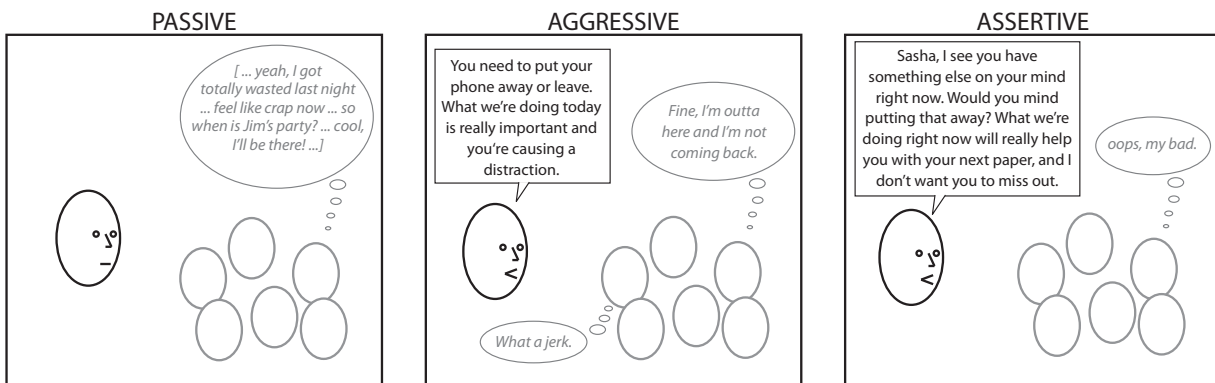
Scenario 4: The students are obviously struggling with the material.



Scenario 5: The students have been complaining about how much they dislike the group activities the TA "makes them do."



Scenario 6: A student is texting in class.



So where do you think you fit in? Start by thinking of your common responses to the above situations: whatever you tend to say or do now probably feels like the "easiest" or "obvious" choice, because it's familiar. But is it the most effective response for achieving the atmosphere and work ethic you want from your students?

Being Assertive Takes Practice

- Think of your response as the script to a play, and experiment with re-writing the script—physically, if that helps, by actually writing it out.
- Try doing role-plays with a partner when you want to develop your assertive responses, especially if you are changing from passive responses. Making a change is literally stressful and uncomfortable, so your heart might race, your throat might tighten, or you might forget what you meant to say. You and your partner can take turns being the student, and experiment with several different responses to the same scenario. Remember, students can be passive, aggressive and assertive as well, so you get practice no matter which role you are playing!

