



LESSON 4

Creating a Classroom Contract

ESSENTIAL QUESTION

How can we work together to create an open, supportive, and reflective learning community?

GUIDING QUESTIONS

- How can a group of individuals with different identities work together to build a community identity that fosters learning?
- How can we create an environment in which everyone feels like they can take risks, test ideas, and ask questions?

LEARNING OBJECTIVE

Students will come together as a community of learners to develop a contract that establishes a reflective classroom environment where students feel known and heard.

OVERVIEW

In the last lesson, students analyzed a definition of community and considered the ways in which their history class could be a community that “sees value” in its group members and is engaged in a “shared enterprise” of learning. In this lesson, students work together to envision an environment that is conducive to this kind of learning and sharing: a reflective classroom community. Throughout the year, students will be learning and talking about challenging topics, many of which are very much relevant to their own lives today. When students feel empowered to contribute honestly and wrestle with multiple perspectives besides their own, such discussions can be positive and even life-changing. Creating a classroom contract is an important step in fostering and maintaining a community where students honor and value differing perspectives, question assumptions, voice their opinions, and actively listen to others. When students are involved in the creation of a classroom contract *alongside* their teacher, rather than receiving the rules *from* their teacher, they are more likely take responsibility for upholding the norms and expectations that the group establishes to guide their interactions and discussions.

DURATION

50-minute class period

MATERIALS

None

TEACHING STRATEGIES

- Journaling
- Contracting
- Wraparound

SEL COMPETENCIES AND PEDAGOGICAL MOVES

1. Build self-awareness by identifying emotions and establishing classroom norms.

In this lesson, students have an opportunity to reflect on their own experiences in classes where they felt comfortable sharing their ideas, as well as their experiences in classes where they felt silenced. Tapping into students' personal experiences lets them know that they matter and prepares them to think about what norms and expectations their classroom community needs in order for its members to feel like they can share ideas, ask questions, make mistakes, and take risks. Furthermore, hearing what other students need can build empathy and helps students understand their individual responsibility in fostering and maintaining the kind of classroom environment that feels welcoming and inclusive to everyone.

2. Encourage responsible decision-making by involving students in the process of creating class norms and expectations.

The process of creating a classroom contract isn't straightforward. It takes time to do well; however, it is time well spent when students feel invested in how the class runs. When students name the factors that contribute to a positive classroom culture and consider the behavioral choices they need to make when interacting with each other, they are

developing the skills to make responsible decisions and will be better prepared to communicate, collaborate, and engage in the courageous conversations they will have this year.

3. Use purposeful and flexible groupings of students.

When teachers use flexible groupings of students that change frequently, it prevents anyone from feeling labeled as a certain kind of student. Regular observations and formative assessment data can help you create purposeful groupings that meet students' individual needs. Students can work in pairs, small groups, or as a whole class. You can create heterogeneous or homogeneous groups based on readiness, interest, or learning preference. Finally, you can create random groups or let students choose their own groups. This lesson provides an excellent opportunity for you to consider in advance how you will group your students. For example, you might group students by learning preference, so students who prefer to be out of their seats can work in one corner with a poster on the wall while students who prefer a quieter environment can cluster together at their desks or on the floor in another part of the room. Or you can use the exit card data from the previous lesson to create groupings of students who have different ideas about the qualities of a strong community and what the class needs in order to strengthen its sense of community. Showing students that you are reading and responding to their exit cards demonstrates that you care about them as individuals and are committed to their personal and academic growth.

NOTES TO TEACHER

1. Preparing for Contracting with Your Students

- Before teaching this lesson, familiarize yourself with the **Contracting** teaching strategy. Facing History teachers have found that effective class contracts typically include several clearly defined expectations, as well as logical consequences for those who do not fulfill their obligations as members of the classroom community. There are many ways to facilitate the development of a classroom contract, and we suggest one method in the activities section of this lesson. The contract should be considered a living document that can be revisited or altered at any time. For this reason, you may want to structure time to return to the contract at strategic points throughout the year—for instance, to preface a particularly emotionally charged reading or in-class activity or at the beginning or end of each unit or term.
- The fifth step of the activity, reflecting on the process of creating the contract, is as important as the creation of the contract itself. As we adults know, collaborating to create a shared final product is hard work, and it is important for students to reflect as a group on their process so that they can identify and celebrate their successes and develop a plan for addressing areas for growth.

2. Alternative Activities for Contracting in Extensions

There are a number of ways that you can introduce contracting to your students. You will find two additional activities in the Extensions section that you can use to replace one or more of the activities in this lesson or to add if you want to extend this lesson over two class periods. Choose the path that works best for your students. You can always revisit any unused contracting activities later in the year to help your students revise or reflect on their contract.

3. Pacing This Lesson

While we recommend that you spend at least one full class period contracting with your students, if your periods are shorter than 50 minutes, you can shorten this lesson by using the Cross the Line or Stand Up/Sit Down strategy explained in Step 3 below. Then ask for volunteers to write the finalized contract on large paper after class or after school and have students sign it the next time the class meets. It is important that you budget time in this lesson for the final discussion while the experience of contracting is fresh in students' minds. If the discussion takes you to the end of the class period, assign the closing journal reflection for homework and do the **Wraparound** as a warm-up in the next lesson.

ACTIVITIES

1. Reflect on Past Experiences at School

- Project the following questions one at a time and ask students to respond in their journals. Let them know that they will be sharing their ideas with a partner.
 - » When have you felt comfortable sharing your ideas and questions in a class? What happened in those moments to help you feel comfortable?
 - » When have you had ideas or questions in a class but did not share them? What was happening at those moments that made you not want to share?
- Then have students turn and talk with a partner about moments when they felt comfortable or uncomfortable sharing their ideas in a class.

2. Brainstorm Expectations for How Students Will Work Together This Year

- Remind students that this year, they will be learning about difficult histories and engaging in challenging discussions that might spark debate and disagreement in the group. In preparation, they will need to establish norms and expectations for behavior that will allow everyone to feel as if they can voice their ideas, pose questions without fear of ridicule, and be heard by others.
- Explain that in order to create and maintain this kind of safe and brave space that encourages risk-taking and where challenging, and often uncomfortable, conversations and learning can happen, they will be working together to develop a classroom contract.

- Ask them to define *contract* and share ideas about the purpose of contracts and the types of things they can protect. Make sure students understand that a contract implies that all parties have a responsibility to uphold an agreement. You might also define and discuss *norm*: a principle of right action binding upon the members of a group and serving to guide, control, or regulate proper and acceptable behavior.¹
- Divide students into small groups of three or four and give each group a piece of chart paper (or pieces of butcher paper or photocopy paper). Ask them to come up with three norms that they feel are important for everyone in the class to follow in order to foster the kind of space that invites participation, sharing, and growth. Instruct them to record their three ideas on their papers and then hang them on the wall when instructed to do so.

3. Choose Classroom Norms and Expectations

- Ask each group to stand by their list and present their ideas to the class by reading each norm and explaining why they think it is important. Then ask students to look for places where they can consolidate ideas. Write this new list on the board.
- Have a volunteer read the new list out loud and discuss as a group whether or not the class feels like they have captured the norms and expectations that they think are important to uphold in this class.
- Finalize the list by asking students to write their initials alongside norms and expectations that they think are important (or use sticky notes). Alternatively, you can use one of the following strategies:

¹ "Norm" (dictionary entry), Merriam-Webster.com, accessed June 23, 2018.

- » **Cross the Line:** Everyone stands in a row, imagining a line in front of them. Or you can place a long piece of masking tape on the floor to serve as the line. You will read a prompt, and anyone who thinks that prompt relates to them should step over the line for a couple of seconds and then step back.
- » **Stand Up/Sit Down:** Everyone starts in a seated position. You will read a prompt, and anyone who thinks that prompt relates to them should stand up for a couple of seconds and then sit back down.

4. Create and Sign the Classroom Contract

- After the class has agreed to its norms and expectations, have one or more students record the information on a piece of chart paper or butcher paper, and then ask everyone to sign their names. Hang the contract on the wall.
- Let students know that they will revisit and reflect on the contract over the course of the year before and after challenging conversations, or if one or more of them feels like the group has strayed from its initial promise to one another

5. Reflect on the Process of Creating the Contract

- Sit in a circle for a closing discussion about the activity so students have an opportunity to reflect together on their process of creating their contract. You might draw from the following questions:

- » What process did your small group use to come up with your three or four norms? What do you think worked well in your small group? How do you think you could do better the next time you work in a small group?
- » What process did our whole group use to come up with our contract? What do you think worked well in the process? How do you think we could do better the next time we work on a project in a whole group?

6. Set Personal Goals for Behavior

- Ask each student to complete the following sentence starters in their journal. Revise the sentence starters as needed to fit what you think your group needs at this time.
 - » For the next month, I am going to work on _____ (choose a norm from the class contract).
 - » One way that I will work on it is by . . .
- Then have each student share their completed sentence starters in a **Wraparound**.

ASSESSMENTS

- Creating a classroom contract that can be posted on the wall keeps everyone accountable for the learning from this lesson. The real measurement of understanding, however, lies in students' (and your) efforts to abide by the contract throughout the year.
- Listen during the Wraparound to hear the norm that each student commits to upholding, and refer back to it in future one-on-one conferences or check-ins by sharing your observations, offering praise and support, and suggesting strategies to help each student reach their goal.

EXTENSIONS

Depending on your students and their readiness for contracting, consider using one or both of the following activities to replace Steps 2–3 in the Activities section of the lesson plan. Alternatively, you can spread contracting over multiple class periods and incorporate the following activities into this lesson plan.

1. Reflect on a List of Norms

- If you think the class would benefit from starting the contracting conversation in a more concrete way, you can share a list of norms that other Facing History classrooms have developed. Ask students to discuss what they think about the following norms. Which ones do they think would help their class create a brave, respectful, productive learning environment?

- » Listen with respect. Try to understand what someone is saying before rushing to judgment.
 - » Make comments using “I” statements.
 - » If you do not feel safe making a comment or asking a question, write the thought in your journal. You can share the idea with your teacher first and together come up with a safe way to share the idea.
 - » If someone says an idea or question that helps your own learning, say thank you.
 - » If someone says something that hurts or offends you, do not attack the person. Acknowledge that the comment—not the person—hurt your feelings and explain why.
 - » Put-downs are never okay.
 - » If you don't understand something, ask a question.
 - » Think with your head and your heart.
 - » Share the talking time—provide room for others to speak.
 - » Do not interrupt others while they are speaking.
 - » Write thoughts in your journal if you don't have time to say them during class.
 - » Journal responses do not have to be shared publicly
- Then invite students to edit the list by deleting, revising, or adding to it so it reflects the norms they are committed to upholding together this year

2. Discuss Possible Scenarios

- Another way to help students develop a contract is to have them envision what they would like to have happen during certain scenarios. Scenarios can be drawn from students' own experiences. They might include situations such as:
 - » When we have an idea or question we would like to share, we can . . .
 - » When we don't feel comfortable sharing an idea out loud, we can . . .
 - » When someone says something that we appreciate, we can . . .
 - » When someone says something that feels confusing, we can . . .
 - » When someone says something that feels offensive, we can . . .
 - » To make sure all students have the opportunity to participate in a small-group discussion, we can . . .
 - » To make sure all students have the opportunity to participate in a whole-group discussion, we can . . .
 - » If we read or watch something that makes us feel sad or angry, we can . . .
 - » To show respect for the ideas of others, we can . . .

TEACHER REFLECTION QUESTIONS

After teaching this lesson or at the end of the day, take some time to reflect on the following questions. You can think about your answers as you plan for the next class period and/or record your ideas in writing on your lesson plan or in a teacher journal so you can refer to them this year and when planning next fall.

1. What do you feel went well today?

2. If you could teach this lesson again, what would you change?

3. What challenging content do you plan to teach that you might need to preface with a review of the classroom contract?

4. Imagine ways that the contract might get broken during a discussion or activity. What steps can you take to help students repair the community?

5. Where in your school or in professional learning opportunities can you continue to develop your pedagogical moves to foster and uphold a reflective and brave classroom space that promotes a culture of questioning and welcomes diverse viewpoints?