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## Guidelines for Creating an SML Course Community Agreement

### **Community Agreements:**

A community agreement (also known as group contract, learning agreement or classroom agreement) is a shared agreement between learners about how we want to work together over the course of our time together. This can include guidelines for what it means to be respectful, expectations about turn-taking, or accessibility needs (e.g., please don't bring peanuts to class).

### **Why have such an agreement:**

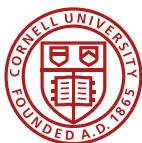
1. Build collective responsibility to make the classroom a safer place and give students an opportunity to voice their needs in co-developing a productive and equitable learning environment.
2. Share accountability and student buy-in to the learning process.
3. Cultivate a strong team to get work done.

### **How to create:**

During one of your first classes OR before you all come to the island, invite students to think about what they need in order to make the class environment safer, equitable, and productive for learning: What would help us work best together? You can do this through individual writing prompts, a think-pair-share, or another active learning strategy. After giving students time to reflect and discuss in small groups, collectively generate a list of agreements.

Make sure to clarify what each contribution means. For example, “being respectful” can mean different things in different contexts. Also check for active consent: are these the guidelines that people want to govern the group? Does anyone have concerns about them? Revise these guidelines until the class members are satisfied and feel ready to commit to the collective agreement.

Faculty often draft a handful of general agreements and then invite the class to contribute additional agreements. When all is done, they ask the class if they are all agreed that the class will conduct themselves within these guidelines. Establishing community agreements early creates an environment in which students are more likely to call attention to bias when it appears in class, are more likely to engage in more thoughtful and open dialogue and are more likely to approach the instructor when they feel bias or discrimination in the classroom so that it can be addressed. Agreements also allow faculty to bring the class back to the agreements, e.g., when a student is dominating the discussion or when a student has violated the agreement to support opinions with facts. Establishing community agreements holds all students, and the instructor, accountable for words and actions.



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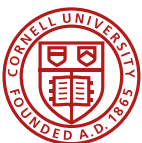
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### **Sample community agreements include:**

- We will speak from our own experiences and make 'I' statements.
- We will respect differences
- We agree to have only 'one mic': we will listen respectfully without interrupting.
- We agree to practice active listening: when someone is speaking, we will listen without also thinking about how we are going to respond/rebut.
- We will allow everyone the chance to speak.
- We will not ask individuals to speak for their perceived social group.
- We agree to critique ideas, not people.
- We will 'move up, move up': those who tend to speak a lot will 'move up' their listening; those who tend to hold back and listen will 'move up' their speaking.
- We will avoid inflammatory language and will avoid assigning blame.
- We agree to accompany opinions with facts/reasons.
- We may share what we learn but will keep others' stories and personal experiences in confidence.
- We will ensure fairness: we have the responsibility to speak up when we hear bias, exclusion, prejudice or other injustice.
- This classroom is a brave space where we are willing to be uncomfortable in order to learn. (this is important, as there has been a lot of emphasis in the popular press about the perceived need of college students to have "safe spaces" where they will hear only those who agree with them. Helping students to agree to be uncomfortable for the sake of learning can open up the space for other voices. Faculty can also ask a student in each class to take on the role of skeptic and to challenge, for argument's sake, what is being asserted.)

### **How to enforce:**

Sometimes participants do not abide by the community agreements they lay out for themselves and others. When that happens, having the agreements that everyone has actively consented to makes it easier to address a particular behavior. As the instructor, you can point out the lack of adherence and ask the class collectively how they would like to address it. Or you can point to the agreement and ask the person to change their behavior so that it aligns with the agreements. The more you can democratize the enforcement, the more buy-in you are likely to have, so think of this as an exercise in building shared accountability rather than in exercising your authority.



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### **References:**

<https://www.seedsforchange.org.uk/groupagree>  
<https://idp.cornell.edu/idp-guides/idp-guide-community-agreements>

Hesterman, S. (2016). The digital handshake: A group contract for authentic elearning in higher education. *Journal of University Teaching and Learning Practice*, 13(3), 1-24.

Oakley, B., Felder, R. M., Brent, R., & Elhaji, I. (2004). Turning student groups into effective teams. *Journal of Student Centered Learning*, 2(1), 9-34.

**Guidelines for Difficult Conversations, adapted from Cornell & Stanford:** (see links for more).

**LARA** stands for **Listen, Affirm, Respond, and Ask Questions**. The LARA method builds respect and common ground between people in conversation, allowing you to explore your differences more openly and honestly. LARA is especially useful when people are feeling that their hot buttons have been triggered. Practice LARA yourself and introduce it to groups you plan to facilitate. The Are You Ready to Talk? toolkit features LARA.

Here's how to use LARA:

**Listen** very carefully.

- Set aside your own agenda. Make your goal to learn what the speaker thinks and feels, not to change what the speaker thinks and feels.
- Pay special attention to the speaker's feelings.
- Aim to understand what the speaker means, not just exactly what they say.

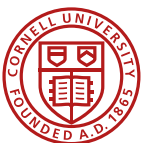
**Affirm** a feeling or value you share with the speaker. This not only makes the person feel heard and understood, but also builds common ground between you. Don't say "I hear you" or "I get it"- show that you heard and get it. Make sure you did.

To affirm the speaker's feelings, use phrases like:

- "What I hear you saying is..."
- "I sense that you feel..."
- "It seems like you feel..."

Examples of shared values affirmations include:

- "I sense we share the desire to do what is right"
- "I appreciate your honesty"
- "It seems we both care deeply about ..."
- "We both seem to agree that ...."
- "I agree with what you said about..."



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**Respond** directly to the concerns or questions the speaker has raised. You may often hear debaters and politicians “talk past” a speaker in order to control the conversation and deliver their talking points. But if you want to sincerely explore your differences, you should show respect by taking the speaker’s concerns seriously and addressing them directly.

In responding to the speaker, avoid labeling or attacking them. Also, avoid portraying your perspectives as universal truths or facts. Instead, use “I-statements” to frame your responses. I-statements include *I feel, I believe, I think, I read, I learned, and so on.*

Consider the good vs. bad responses below:

- “I’ve read many scientific studies suggesting that race is a social construction, not a biological fact” vs. “Science shows that race is a myth, and anyone who doesn’t believe this is simply ignorant.”
- “When you say that women are inferior, I feel angry” vs. “You are sexist.”
- “I have read in the Bible that people suffer because God is punishing them” vs. “People suffer because God is punishing them.”

**Ask** questions or **add** information.

Open-ended questions help you gain a better understanding of the other person’s perspective. They also demonstrate that you are genuinely interested in an exchange of information, not just working to win your point.

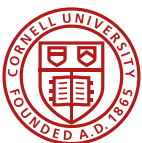
- “How did that make you feel?”
- “Why do you think you reacted that way?”
- “How did you reach that conclusion?”

Only after you have listened to and understood the speaker’s concern can you add additional information, such as a personal story or opinion.

Continue using **LARA** until tensions lessen. Remember, discussing differences takes skill, so if it doesn’t go perfectly the first time, keep practicing.

Cornell LARA: <https://idp.cornell.edu/idp-guides/idp-guide-using-lara/>

Stanford Lara: <https://sparqtools.org/lara/>



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