

Guidelines for Classroom Conflict Transformation

Prior to the start of the Fall 2021 semester, UWM updated its [Interim Covid-Related Health and Safety Rules](#). Most pertinent to the in-person classroom, UWM policy requires all individuals to wear appropriate face coverings while indoors at UWM facilities. Despite the clear evidence that mask wearing reduces transmission even when there's no social distancing, this and other safety measures have become politicized. It is possible that the tensions seen in the public square around masking or vaccinations may reveal themselves in the classroom. There is much we as instructors can do to proactively address and mitigate such possible tensions.

The following practices help to foster classroom climates characterized by mutual trust, responsibility and care for each other. While these practices will not necessarily eliminate conflicts altogether, they will certainly increase our own and our students' capacities to engage each other constructively should conflicts arise.

1. Discuss attendance and classroom requirements for health and safety.

Make time during the initial class session to discuss **attendance and classroom requirements** and **address student questions or concerns**.

- **Attendance:** Make clear that students who are ill or symptomatic should *not* come to class. This may require an attendance policy with more flexibility than usual. Consider ways that students who can't be present in class could make up missed work and/or complete online learning activities instead.
- **Classroom requirements:** UWM has implemented reasonable health and safety protocols, taking into account recommendations by local, state and national public health authorities, in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. UWM is also guided by public health practices and will promote shared responsibility among all members of the community. In order to accomplish this, UWM has updated the [Interim COVID-Related Health and Safety Rules](#).
- **Course Syllabus Statement:** Please consider including adding the short or long [Covid Syllabus Statement](#) to your syllabi.
- Make clear how you will support students in following these requirements and how you will address any behavior that does not conform to them. For example, if a student is not wearing a mask in the **classroom setting**, instructors should:
 - a. Provide information to the student on the health and safety standards and rules, including the requirement for mask wearing. If the student agrees and complies, then continue on with class.
 - b. Ask a student who does not comply to leave class and go to one of the mask handout locations on campus. If the student doesn't leave, instructors can take a break during class to talk to the student. The student should be informed that the failure to leave class could result in nonacademic discipline. Please note that per [SAAP 1-5](#): "Removal of a student from a classroom should occur only when the teaching and/or learning process cannot continue unless the student is removed. When a student is removed from a classroom for

misconduct, such a removal applies only to that specific class session. The student may attend future class sessions unless disciplinary action, which restricts them from attending class, is imposed by the Dean of Students Office.”

- c. Call UWM Police **only as a last resort**. UWM Police will provide the student with a face covering in the hallway (they will not enter the classroom unless requested or to address further disrupting behaviors).
- d. Contact the Dean of Students Office (dos@uwm.edu) if you have questions or need to consult about a specific situation.
- e. Utilize the Dean of Students Office [Report It](#) form to report violations of the health and safety standards and rules. Repeated or egregious disregard of these standards and rules puts individuals’ own health and the health of others in danger. This behavior may result in referral to the nonacademic discipline process.

2. Invite students to develop community agreements for in-class interactions. Be proactive in discussing possible tensions or worrisome scenarios.

Classes that meet face-to-face are likely to feature significant levels of student interaction through discussions, lab work, and/or other shared learning activities. At the start of the term, it can be helpful to invite students to discuss and commit to a list of behaviors all participants will practice in order to foster a learning environment that feels respectful, safe, and constructive. Doing this as a class is one way of building community together, and it encourages each student to recognize their shared responsibility for the classroom climate.

Additionally, as anxieties are running high during the COVID-19 pandemic, having a discussion like this early on gives you and your students the opportunity to talk through possible worrisome scenarios (e.g., What if someone coughs or sneezes during class? What if someone appears ill? What if someone isn’t wearing a mask?) and to determine appropriate, reasonable responses in accordance with the Interim COVID-Related Health and Safety Rules. A discussion like this may help to lessen anxieties and encourage responsible behavior. Also, if such a scenario does occur, you and the students will be better equipped to respond in a calmer, more unified fashion.

3. Elicit student feedback early and often.

In addition to facilitating a whole-class discussion about community agreements and concerns, provide students with ways to share privately with you their concerns, suggestions, or any other information they would like you to know about what they are experiencing (in the course or in their lives) and how that might affect their performance in the course. At the start of the term, for example, you might ask students to submit a personal information sheet or survey. You might offer similar check-in opportunities a few weeks into the semester and/or at midterm, or perhaps even more frequently.

If students disclose medical issues, related or unrelated to COVID, that may constitute a disability, you should refer them to the Accessibility Resource Center (<https://uwm.edu/arc/>) to determine whether they are entitled to a reasonable accommodation.

Note that you should alert students you are not a confidential resource and may need to inform certain University officials about their concerns, specially those that relate to child abuse and neglect and/or

sexual misconduct. You can also refer students to confidential resources, including University Counseling Services: <https://uwm.edu/norris/counseling/>.

Some students may not have concerns, and some may not choose to share personal information with you. However, by giving all students structured and secure ways to share their feedback, you communicate that you perceive and care about them as whole individuals—a recognition that’s even more important during a public health crisis. And of course, you may learn information that helps you adapt your teaching to respond to student needs, head off a potential problem before it worsens, or connect a student to beneficial campus resources.

4. Build community in ways that promote accountability & concern for each other.

The more students feel a sense of community with each other, the more likely they are to be able to address constructively tensions or conflicts among them. Having the class develop shared agreements (described above) is one activity that can foster this sense of community. Other possible community-building activities include:

- Introductions that allow for more creative or personal sharing. *Note: it’s important to structure these activities with enough openness that students can choose how much they wish to disclose about themselves.*
- Regular whole-class or small-group check-ins throughout the semester.
- Paired or small-group learning activities that provide opportunity for meaningful, guided collaborative work. Team-based learning and problem-based learning are examples.
- Peer teaching assignments, in which students explain concepts to each other and/or share with each other what they have learned about a topic.
- Peer review assignments, in which students exchange drafts to offer feedback and constructive suggestions.

5. When a conflict emerges, address it immediately and directly.

Finally, while the above practices lessen the likelihood of conflicts erupting, there is still the potential for tensions between students or for hurtful remarks or harmful behaviors to occur in the classroom. If this happens, it is your responsibility to respond at that moment. At a minimum, pause and acknowledge the tension you’re feeling. It is better to respond with imperfect words than to try to ignore or avoid the conflict. If you need support or have questions or concerns, please contact the Dean of Students Office (dos@uwm.edu).