

Clarifying Expectations and Setting Ground Rules

(from Dawson, 1998, pp. 19-21)

Expectations

Expectations ...concern both what you want from your students and what they want from you. With first year groups, it will be mostly a case of explaining what you want from them. Because they will be, more than likely, unfamiliar with tertiary study, they will have little realistic idea of what they should expect from you or how to recognise it when you deliver it. You must introduce them to the processes of tutorial learning gradually, and be prepared for the fact that it will take new students the best part of their first semester to give much sign that changes are occurring.

Emphasise that delivering maximum benefit from tutorials depends upon active reading and participation and on the discussion of the subject matter from an informed position. The university system is unsuited to last-minute cramming and it is work consistently done over the course of a semester that will pay the highest dividends both in assignments and in examinations. Let your students know that you look forward to hearing their views and opinions and to providing a forum for constructive discussion. You may or may not wish to negotiate aspects of your leadership role, but you must at least explain in general terms what you intend to do.

Students in second- or later-year groups may or may not already know one another. In some courses your students may have been grouped at random by subject choice; in a professional degree the students may all know each other fairly well. In the first case, you can start out as you would with a first-year group; it will quickly become apparent what quality of interaction you can expect and how much you will have to foster. In the second, there could well be a pre-existing group dynamic which you will have to influence to ensure that your objectives are met. Sound preparation, good-humoured enthusiasm and focusing on outcomes remain the key.

Ground Rules

(from: Barrington, 1998, p. 6)

The purpose of an initial formulation of ground rules is as much to lower the chances of dysfunctional tutorials as to encourage a supportive environment. Ground rules provide a sense of structure and set acceptable limits to discussion. Experience has shown that if rules are left unclarified they may not evolve automatically, making remedial action more difficult later on. The public establishment of a few basic ground rules will generally be sufficient to ensure compliance with them throughout the semester, and the group will feel more at ease from having set its collective seal on standards of appropriate and inappropriate behaviour.

Ground rules should be few in number, basic and – once established – only renegotiable at the expressed wish of a majority of the class. You might ask your group to consider the following rules for adoption.

- There should be no personal criticism or put down comments.
- Everyone should listen when one person is speaking.
- Latecomers should not disrupt others but should catch up after the tutorial is over if they feel they have missed something.

Group members may make other suggestions. However, ground rules should only govern interaction between participants. They should not be broadened out to include issues such as turning up on time or undertaking a set amount of preparation. These matters concern the exercise of individual responsibility and will be difficult or impossible to enforce. They are better dealt with as expectations, rather than as matters for group legislation.

Once ground rules are agreed upon, it will be your responsibility to ensure they are enforced for the benefit of the group as a whole – so be sure that they are fair, reasonable and practical. If they are breached, tactfully intervene to remind the person responsible that he or she has broken a basic understanding. With regard to personal slights, failure to enforce basic respect between class members will render the group ineffective for the rest of the semester, so act immediately if the agreed rule is broken.

Here are a couple of ways ground rules can be established:

- By pyramid-style discussion
- Put up some ground rules on an overhead transparency and invite people to talk about them in threes, and then respond by suggesting more.
- You may also find it useful to review the ground rules some time during the semester. This can be particularly helpful if things aren't going so well.