

# Building Trust

**Source:** Christine Witkowski, Sociology

Building a healthy learning community is essential if you're going to have a meaningful dialogue in the classroom. Part of what makes a healthy learning community is trust. Students need to trust that I am an ally who is rooting for their success, so I try to make that clear from day one.

While I am rigorous, I'm also very supportive and encouraging. Although I set high standards and consistently enforce the policies I lay out in the syllabus, I always explain why the policies and standards are important.

Students also need to trust one another if they are going to be willing to discuss controversial subjects, share personal experiences, and feel confident in asking questions and contributing to discussions. To that end, I emphasize the need for respect and courtesy. I try to help students get to know one another through small group and full class activities that are both interactive, but also focused upon course content. Through these student-to-student interactions, we build a level of trust that is critical to the success of the course.

Sometimes I'm more effective at this community building than other times. It depends a lot upon the personalities of a particular class, especially their level of introversion and extroversion. I'm fortunate to have a subject matter that is personally relevant which makes it easier to lure students into discussions.

Here are some quick and dirty tips for building trust:

- Emphasize the need for respect and courtesy in the classroom at all times.
- Address violations of respect and courtesy promptly, with respect and courtesy.
- Talk about how open classroom dialogue nurtures a healthier community and democracy.
- Get to know something(s) about each student.
- Demonstrate genuine care and concern about students' personal, academic, and professional lives.
- Relate content and questions as directly as possible to student interests.
- Ask questions of students.
- Actively listen to students.
- Use empathy.
- Show that you are an ally. For example, provide supportive resources to meet student needs. Contact students who are struggling to check in with them.
- Be supportive and encouraging.
- Be enthusiastic about course material. Relate course material to student lives.
- If providing constructive feedback, explain why better development of knowledge/skill is important.
- When explaining procedures and consistently enforcing procedures, explain why those procedures are important.
- Be consistent, firm, and fair. Maintain high standards, but explain why those are important.
- Advocate for students.
- Share information about yourself, as appropriate.

- Provide opportunities for students to get to know one another, especially in the context of content-related activities. Utilize small group and full class activities that are interactive, but also focused upon course content.