

SCHOOL: ISIS A. Malignani, Udine, Italy

TEACHER: Raffaella Tomasini

CLASS: Third class

AGE OF THE STUDENTS: 16 years

SUBJECT: Italian literature and history



Negotiating Norms: Secondary Students Re-Shape Their Class Culture

This example describes how a class of secondary school students used a structured negotiation process to establish norms for working together, successfully changing the class climate and making group learning possible and profitable.



Introduction

I teach literary subjects at the A. Malignani Technical Institute in Udine, Italy. I have always believed that good relationships between students and teachers, and also between students and students, are necessary to create the right learning climate. However, though good relationships blossom naturally in some classes, in others they do not. In such cases, I have always tried to change the climate through targeted interventions, sometimes effectively, sometimes without obtaining results.

When I started working with Project Zero, I was struck by the fact that positive relations in the learning group were considered central and were presupposed as necessary in order for a group learning activity to function well. This belief was immediately put into practice during the first

meeting of the *MLTV* working group, when we started with a protocol aimed at building shared group norms. *Norms Construction: A Process of Negotiation* comes from the [School Reform Initiative](#), a nonprofit dedicated to creating transformational learning communities committed to educational equity and excellence. This was the first experience, confirmed by many other activities during the year, that showed me how the tools proposed by Project Zero are useful for adults as well as for students. Negotiating group norms allowed the adults, who were meeting for the first time, to share a language, concerns and values, creating a climate of acceptance and safety among us.

I thought of the norms construction protocol again when considering how to improve the negative class climate that pervaded my third year class.

The class group

Creating good relationships in a group that does not interact collaboratively and respectfully is not easy, and it is not accomplished in a single step. Instead, it requires constant intervention and adjustment.

I undertook the norms construction protocol early in the school year with a third year class (students aged 16). Though I didn't know this group of pupils before the school year began, colleagues who had taught them in previous years presented the class as problematic both in terms of academic outcomes and behavior. At the beginning of the year, the behavior of the students confirmed what my colleagues had said: relations among the students and with teachers were often uncooperative, disrespectful, and sometimes characterized by a mocking attitude toward those students perceived as academically weaker.



The challenge

Nobody liked this unfavorable class climate--not the teachers, and not the pupils, who however seemed unable to abandon the behaviors they had developed. For this reason, I thought it would be useful to negotiate norms to guide the functioning of the group. ***For these norms to work, they had to come from the pupils themselves. They had to originate from students' needs in order to be perceived as an answer to a problem***



and not as something imposed from the outside.

First steps

I started the activity by proposing a protocol for identifying and negotiating the norms that pupils considered necessary for working effectively in a group. Since the norms are supposed to address each individual's needs, the first step in the protocol asks students to reflect individually on moments of their schooling when working collaboratively has encouraged learning. After this personal reflection, students are invited to share their thoughts in a small group and to negotiate shared norms of behaviour.

In this first phase I made sure to give enough time for students to complete their individual reflections. The goal was to not rush those who needed time to think, and also to indicate that it was important to take the work seriously. Not all the students immediately understood the value of the task. Some started right in writing their reflections, but others looked around bored. However, after five minutes, even students who seemed less interested wrote down their reflections, perhaps because they saw the other students working on the task. Everyone produced three norms important to them, and it was then possible to start the group's negotiation process.

Individual reflections

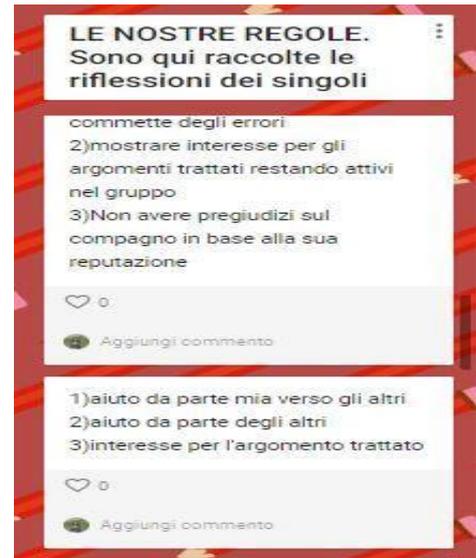
The students' individual reflections were posted on a specially created Padlet (<https://padlet.com/tomraf63/regole3>). The individual observations make it clear why the class did not work well together. The students were afraid of being judged by their classmates. They perceived that some students held negative preconceptions about the ability of others, and they did not appreciate that some students did not cooperate in class activities with the necessary commitment. Here is a selection of the students' proposed norms:

- 1) Being together in the group without hatred and rivalry among the members
- 2) Attention and desire to complete the task
- 3) No members who do not contribute and whose behavior burdens the group

- 1) Respect your partner even if he/she makes mistakes.
- 2) Show interest in the topics discussed and stay active in the group.
- 3) Do not have prejudices about one's partner based on his/her reputation.

- 1) Everyone must do their part.
- 2) Respect people and their opinions.
- 3) Try to understand opposing opinions.

- 1) Know when to be serious and when to joke.
- 2) Open up to others' ideas and do not interrupt.
- 3) Respect each classmate even if his/her reasoning is totally wrong.



Negotiated norms

After this first phase of individual reflection, we began the negotiation process. I organized three groups to discuss the norms identified by each group member and to find consensus around three shared norms. At first all three groups seemed to be working hard, but one of the groups quickly concluded the task, despite one student's efforts to stimulate further dialogue. The negotiation process resulted in the following norms, which were posted on the Padlet by the students:



- a) Cooperation for a common purpose
- b) Respect (no judgments)
- c) Freedom of opinion/unity

- a) Respect for others and their opinions; good co-existence without hatred, rivalry or prejudice
- b) Everyone has to contribute without the desire to prevail over others.
- c) We face joys and sorrows together without letting the boat sink.

- a) Respect every facet of the personality of others, even their mistakes.
- b) Cooperate in order to help members having difficulty and to proactively work for improvement.
- c) Remain active in the group and communicate interest by influencing others positively.

The first set of norms, produced by the group that hastily concluded its discussion, differs considerably from the other two: while in the others the concepts are explained, in the first they

are only listed. The publication of the negotiated norms on the Padlet made clear that the different levels of effort had produced different results.

Re-reading

During this first negotiation, I took note of what was happening in the classroom by observing the different working groups and, in particular, transcribing the discussion among the members of one group. My notes highlighted the varying level of commitment of different pupils. Before continuing to the next stage of the protocol, I read what I had written to the students and asked for their comments. A debate immediately ensued regarding how the three groups worked differently:

"The two groups worked well because the students were eager to change the situation of the class."

"All the groups have nevertheless carried out the task, achieving the objectives."

"There is a considerable lack of commitment on the part of some members of the class."

"When we work in groups, the work is always more fluid, except for groups without any desire to work. When this happens, a way to encourage the community should be found."

"In our group everyone actively participated."

"We are all in agreement on the same norms."



Upon hearing the criticism from his peers, a student from the group that quickly finished its discussion defended his group: "Those who were not part of the group cannot make judgements about how the group worked." Another student immediately observed, "But the results of the work are visible to everyone and are less in-depth than the others." The first pupil replied, "We couldn't discuss longer because we were all in agreement." A third pupil said, "We discussed at length because we had different ideas and had to find a shared position."

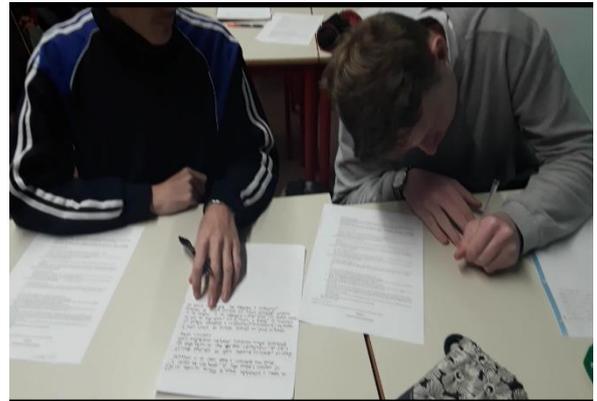
This exchange clearly shows the importance of the documentation I collected. Reading my transcripts of the group work to the students prompted a discussion that uncovered several important issues related to classroom norms.

Reflections on the classroom discussion

The discussion among the students drove home the usefulness of the negotiated norms. All three sets of negotiated norms state, more or less explicitly, that collaboration and commitment are necessary in order for a group to work effectively. The group that quickly concluded its work had not fully committed to the activity, and their final product was less rich than the others. The class agreed that the groups which had put the norms into practice produced objectively better products. To the students, this clearly demonstrated an authentic need to follow the proposed norms.

This debate also revealed that expressing different ideas in a group, far from being a problem, is an advantage so long as the different opinions are listened to and considered respectfully. This experience highlighted the usefulness of norms requiring respect for and consideration of all positions/points of view.

An unexpected result of this activity was that the students whose work was challenged for being superficial worked harder in subsequent activities in order to show that they were capable and cooperative.



What happened next

The Norms Construction protocol took place in October. The negotiated norms were then published on a Padlet that we have referenced throughout the school year. Often at the beginning of an activity, the Padlet is opened and the norms simply re-read. Group work has become the normal way of working in this class, and the climate during group activities is usually collaborative and productive. A few challenges have come up. For example, it was very difficult for us to stay within the time constraints of some activities, so at one point we decided to add the norm, “Respect the established time allotments of the activity.” Also, sometimes a discussion became so heated that it was difficult for other groups to work, so we expanded the definition of “respect” to include speaking with a moderate tone of voice.



It is notable that, with some minor adjustments, the basic norms identified in October have remained unchanged throughout the year. ***I think this is because these norms are the result of a serious and shared reflection process. They are the result of an in-depth consideration and understanding of student needs, led by the students themselves.***

I also shared the Padlet with parents during our conferences, offering a new, and for some surprising, perspective on the difficult relationships in this class. This made it easier to create shared agreement between school and family about which values were important to uphold.

What I would do differently

I shared this work with some colleagues, but not with the entire group of teachers who teach this class. When I use the protocol in future years, I will present to all the teachers of the class both the norms identified by the students and the documentation collected while the activity was carried out. Negotiating norms allows the students themselves to highlight relationship problems that the whole group of teachers should know about. These norms indicate the students' self-identified needs, and we teachers can collaborate to address these needs. The students' point of view, moreover, allows us to know students better, avoiding superficial evaluations of the issues underlying how a class interacts. Finally, consistency among teachers is important when using a set of norms meant to represent shared values.

