

Classroom Contexts Survey

Facilitation Guide

What is it?

Each of us brings our unique contextual backgrounds to our learning communities. Providing a safe context in which they can share their passions, anxieties, or identities can help innovators better understand how to support them more effectively. Use this activity to facilitate your own understanding of your classroom community in a safe online context.

Why use it?

Principled Innovation Practice M1 (“Identify and Acknowledge Fundamental Values”) is described in the framework in this way:



Distinguish the values that are important to the individuals, team, community and learning environment and ensure that the process, structures, and solutions honor, appreciate, and reflect the identified values.

In going beyond a simple cognitive knowledge of others’ values, **empathy** helps us create the emotional connection that we need to “honor” and “appreciate” those values, even if we ourselves might disagree on those values. This felt understanding for where others are coming from gives us the background we need for developing solutions that make a difference in their lives.

In any classroom experience—and particularly in online classes—it can be difficult to know where students are coming from. To complicate factors, some students in a classroom rarely speak without being invited to do so, and often teachers find out important information about their students only when their students complete their post-course surveys. Rather than waiting until after the course is complete, begin the course with activities designed to help you understand the diversity of experiences within your classroom.

The same kind of activity can be used in any classroom or community context as a tool to help Principled Innovators better understand their community partners.

What you need

- Time: 15 minutes of students’ time
- Survey method (for example, an anonymous quiz in Canvas, as discussed here: <https://community.canvaslms.com/t5/Question-Forum/Anonymous-Survey/td-p/170836>)
- Class or community

Instructions

Step 1: Prepare

Create a survey online for students to provide you with feedback. This can be done with an ungraded “anonymous” quiz assignment in Canvas which can track completion

(<https://community.canvaslms.com/t5/Question-Forum/Anonymous-Survey/td-p/170836>) or with a truly anonymous third-party online survey tool, such as an unauthenticated Google Form

(<https://html.form.guide/google-forms/make-google-form-survey-anonymous/>) or SurveyMonkey

(<https://www.surveymonkey.com/curiosity/how-to-build-an-anonymous-survey>).

For this exercise to be effective, it helps to keep it anonymous and to let your students know that their submissions will be confidential. While that may mean that not all students will participate and that some students may use the opportunity inappropriately, it does provide a chance to speak up for those students who want to do so privately.

Some sample questions appear below. Consider making the survey easy to complete.

1. Please help me to better understand you by completing the following sentences with as little or as much detail as you would like to include:
 - a. “I feel most confident in classes that...” (things that your favorite classes have/don’t have, kinds of assignments you feel work best for you, etc.)
 - b. “I identify as...” (race, gender, ability, religion, nationality, etc.)
 - c. “I often worry about...” (family situations, grades, finances, etc.)
 - d. “In our society, I would like to see a change in...”
 - e. “Some people that I have looked up to in life include...”
 - f. “Something I feel I might be able to contribute to this community is...”
2. Please feel free to provide any additional thoughts in the space below that might not have been covered or included in the questions above.

Step 2: Situate

Explain (either in a classroom setting, in the header of the form, or in some other manner) that the point of the survey is to help you understand the experiences of your students so that you can better support them throughout the course. If you would like to use the experience as an opportunity to model empathy, you could also include the following definitions from the PI framework and situate your intentions for the survey within the context of developing empathy and perspective-taking:

“Empathy is the quality of being in tune with the emotions of others, including the ability to imagine and understand how other people might be feeling or thinking. Empathy invites us to extend beyond our own perspective and truly care for each other.”

“Perspective-taking is the ability to take on another’s point of view to better understand how they think or feel and consider options we may have initially missed due to our positionality.”

Explain that while you aren’t able to change everything about the way the class has been designed, you hope to better understand some of the unique perspectives your students bring into class with the goal of creating the best possible experience for everyone involved.

Step 3: Distribute

Distribute the survey to the students during the first day of class. Add an expiration date to close the survey by the end of the first week.

Step 4: Analyze and Debrief

Review the results and adapt your course interactions as appropriate. Thank the students in the next class for their responses. Be careful not to discuss what students said in their submissions—even if multiple students said the same thing in a response, if you mention that response in class, one of those students might perceive your statement as a violation of confidentiality.