

## **Cultivating and Celebrating the Rules**

**By Tracy Lysne**

As a classroom teacher, the way I approached rules was very similar to the way I garden. Let me explain!

In late winter, as the weather begins to warm, my thoughts turn to planting. I think about what I want to grow this year, and I buy the seeds. When the threat of frost wanes, I carefully till the soil and plant my seeds. I stand over my freshly planted garden and water it with as I contemplate the harvest that lies ahead. “So far, so good!” I say to myself.

Then my garden sits. Plants grow slowly. I get busy with other things. I see my garden out of the corner of my eye each day as I rush by. Sometimes, I forget to water it, causing the plants to droop and falter. I don’t weed as often as I should; when I get around to it, the weeds are sometimes far more plentiful than the vegetables. Pulling them out becomes a real chore.

Although I sometimes forget daily maintenance, like weeding, I still get lots of veggies come harvest time, but they are not as beautiful as they might have been, nor as tasty.

### **Opportunities for cultivation**

At first, my approach to classroom rules was similar. On the first day, my students and I thought about the year ahead. We shared our goals and created rules we felt would help us reach those goals. We looked at our social contract and thought to ourselves, “So far, so good!” before signing our contract and posting it on the wall. And there the rules remained, drooping and sagging off the wall, neglected, except when things went *so* wrong that we were forced to turn to the rules to resolve big issues. If I forgot the daily maintenance, weeds grew quickly. Sometimes I missed opportunities to cultivate and celebrate the rules -- to make them truly proactive, as they are meant to be.

### **Growing the students**

Why do many students dislike rules? One reason is because we call attention to them only when things go wrong, so they see them as negative—a big drag—and to be discussed only when the teacher is disappointed or mad. This prompted me to think about what I could do to make them a positive part of our classroom, and to lead students to live by them more proactively. I needed to cultivate and celebrate our rules on a daily—even hourly—basis, so they could begin to see them in a positive light. I needed to help my students think about what we were doing well, and how living by the rules helped us succeed. I also wanted to use our Social Contract to set goals for what we needed to do better.

### **Ideas for cultivating and celebrating classroom rules**

#### **QUICK SURVEY**

At the end of the class period give each student a quick Social Contract survey that can be shared in the moment such as Google forms or Mentimeter. Have them assess themselves on one or more of the agreements. As a follow up, take the one indicated that was most challenging and set goals for the next class period.

## PROCESS OBSERVER

Choose some part of the social contract and appoint one or more process observers to observe a group or class. They can watch for specific ways the contract is demonstrated and name them at the end of the work period.

## SHOUT OUTS

At the beginning of the week or class period, students randomly draw a partner. Tell them to watch that person that day or week, noting examples of how they see them following the contract. At the end of the day or week students shout out what noticed and how it connects to the class Social Contract privately or publicly..

## PARTNER SHARE

Students pair up and share one rule they are going to work on during class. Partners brainstorm things they need to do to live out that rule. Tell them to watch one another and plan to quickly check in with each other at the end of the period. What did they notice? What were some examples of their partner living the rule?

## PERSONAL CHECK-IN

At the end of the class period, do quick self-assessments of how well the rules are being honored. Read each rule and have your students think about it before they give themselves a thumbs-up or a thumbs-down. You could do this privately (behind a notebook) or for all to see.

## NOTE TO SELF

Each student receives a sticky note and writes a quick note to him/herself, naming a rule they are going to live by that period. At the end of the period, they assess themselves and note an example (or evidence), writing both on their Post-it. This note becomes their “ticket out the door.” Collect all tickets.

## ON TARGET

Create a target symbol on paper or electronically. Choose (or have students choose) a rule for the class to work on. Talk about what the rule means and what it looks/sounds/feels like to live it. At the end of the period have each student put an X on the target showing how close they were to the target. Were they on target or did they miss the mark? If on the target why? If not on target, why not?

## IT TAKES EFFORT TO CHANGE

At the start of a class period, invite students to read the rules. Have them select the rule they believe will be the most difficult to follow during that period. Then invite them to predict how much effort it will take to successfully live by it. On a scale of 1 to 5 (5 representing the most effort), students may write their predictions in their academic planner. At the end of the period, students look at their predictions and assess how much effort was actually required to follow the rule selected.

## I NOTICED

Name it! If your students are doing something well, don't forget to say so. Be specific: let them know what you are seeing, how it reinforces the rules, and the impact the positive behavior is

having on your classroom and learning. This can be done spontaneously in the flow of learning, or at specific times such as at the start or close of class. *Every group was focused for the entire lab despite several setbacks. You created a very productive classroom today.*

#### SPONTANEOUS CELEBRATIONS

If your students have been living the contract, why not celebrate? However, don't dangle the carrot ("If you behave according to the contract for the next two weeks, we'll have a pizza party."); this is a recipe for resentment. Students don't want to be manipulated, but they love surprises and celebrations.

#### **Reap what you sow**

I wish I'd known about all these strategies (and the importance of making positive connections to the rules on a daily basis) earlier in my teaching career. After years of teaching students and adults, and observing classrooms in which students feel the rules are only brought up when they're broken, I have become convinced that you'll have a more bountiful harvest—a more successful school year—if you do daily rules maintenance. The key is getting into the habit of making proactive, positive connections to your social contract. Teach students to see the rules positively, as desirable, as guideposts; to "live the rules" and reap the benefits of knowing that good rules help everyone learn and grow. Happy cultivating!