Norms

"We are more likely to cheat if we see others doing so. We tend to conform to accepted norms of reasonable behaviour, rather than adhere to strict rules." -- Evan Davis

Norms reflect a consensus about accepted behavior in a specific social context, such as one of our classes. Typically, they arise from the group. Norms need not be written down—typically they are not—and the sanction for violating them is often social disapproval. Academic rules, in contrast, are specified by the instructor; they are almost always written down along with specific penalties for violation. The policies that most of us have in our course outlines regarding attendance and late assignments are good examples of rules.   Both norms and rules can contribute to a smoothly running class. This week's post describes an activity that helps surface class norms which support productive behavior. The activity takes about 15 minutes.

1. Put a diagram like this on the board or chart paper—a rough, hand-drawn one is fine.

	Instructor	Students
Best classes		
Worst classes		

2. Ask students to call to mind their best class and consider what students did to make it so good. They also consider what the teachers of their best classes did.
3. Get a volunteer to record ideas as you lead the discussion. Students will often need prompting to focus on behaviors. Initially, they will be more likely to say things like "There were good discussions," rather than "Everyone talked" or "People listened to each other."
4. Switch the conversation to common behaviors in their worst classes.
5. While you may add an idea to the chart, avoid taking over the task. The idea is to harness group norms to support productive behavior rather than dictate it yourself.
6. Finally, encourage the group select a few important student behaviors to use and avoid. Commit to at least one of the teacher behaviors yourself.
7. It can be useful to revisit the list a month or so after the start of class.