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# The Crucial Cs

## A Frame for Thinking About Classroom Culture

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To thrive in the classroom and in life, there are certain needs that every person has. Each of us needs to have close relationships with others, to feel valued in our communities, and to have a sense of control over our lives.

Adults who do not participate in a classroom community in positive ways may be lacking in one or more important internal certainties. These four vital protections are called the **Crucial Cs** :

### **Connect**

Being connected to others—feeling like part of a community

### **Capable**

Having the capability to take care of themselves and get their needs met

### **Count**

Being valued by others—knowing that they count in the classroom

### **Courage**

Having courage



## Connect

Students who feel connected in the classroom feel secure. They are likely to reach out and embrace working with others, whether that be offering help to a classmate, asking a classmate to explain their reasoning, or participating enthusiastically in group work. Students who do not feel connected may find their place in the community by disrupting activities to call attention to themselves. Have you ever had a student who distracts from the work of the class with entertaining stories? That student may have been looking for their place in the community. A student who feels connected can say with conviction, “I believe that I belong.”

### How to Help Our Students Feel Connected

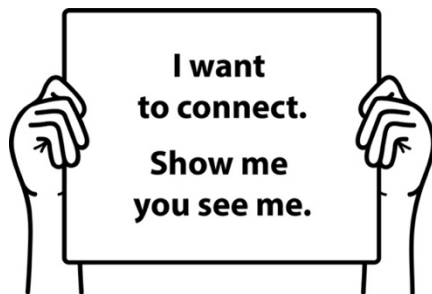
Here are some strategies that can help students feel connected in the adult math classroom:

- Create opportunities for cooperative problem-solving. For example, give tasks where students work together in small groups to accomplish a goal. Assigning roles to students in groups (note-taker, time-keeper, etc.) can help everyone feel they have a place and are important to the group.
- Show an interest in each student. Learn to pronounce their names and greet them by name. Acknowledge students' moods and feelings.
- If a student brings up something that is off-topic, and you can't take time in the moment, arrange a time to talk about their issue later.
- Celebrate everyone's work and reasoning, not just the work of students who come up with the right answers quickly.
- Recognize students' strengths and interests, both mathematical and otherwise. For example, compliment the style choices of a student who puts effort into their wardrobe or chat about movies with a student who is into cinema.

#### Ponder:

How does it affect your classroom culture when students feel connected?

How does feeling connected help students grow as independent learners?



Students who aren't feeling connected may try to find their place in the classroom community by calling attention to themselves or monopolizing the teacher's time. This can feel annoying—to stay focused on helping the student connect, imagine them wearing a sign that says, “I want to connect. Show me you see me.”



# Capable

Students who feel capable in the classroom feel competent. They exhibit self-control and self-discipline, are willing to take on responsibility, and are self-reliant. Note that this kind of capability is different from mastery of math concepts. A student who feels capable may still struggle to understand the math they are working on or to complete a task, but they believe in their ability to learn and will show persistence. Students who do not feel capable may exhibit the characteristics of a dependent learner. Have you ever had a student who couldn't get started until you broke the task down into small steps for them? That student may not have believed in their own ability to learn, so they relied on their teacher to do the hard thinking for them. A student who feels capable can say with conviction, "I believe that I can do it."

## How to Help Our Students Feel Capable

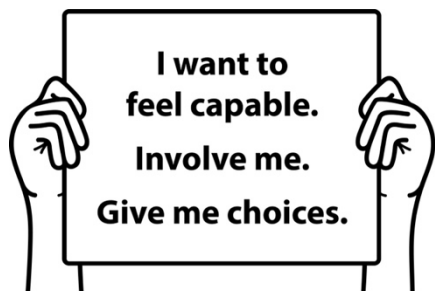
Here are some strategies that can help students feel capable in the adult math classroom:

- Celebrate students' reasoning even (or especially) when it leads to incorrect answers. Find what was logical in the reasoning and connect it to mathematical skills. For example, if a student adds  $\frac{1}{2}$  and  $\frac{1}{3}$  and gets  $\frac{2}{5}$ , notice that they chose a strategy that makes sense because  $1 + 1 = 2$  and  $2 + 3 = 5$ .
- Help students find their own errors. Instead of correcting the student with the fraction reasoning above, give them a tool to help them make sense of it themselves. For example, suggest they draw a picture of the fractions to see whether their answer makes sense.
- Give students time and opportunity for productive struggle. Nothing builds confidence like authentic success at something that is challenging.
- Celebrate effort and make connections to growth mindset. Students who learn to value effort develop persistence and confidence.
- Celebrate improvement. Remind students of how far they have come and how much they have learned, especially when the goal seems far away.
- Have realistic expectations. Acknowledge when work is challenging. For adult learners, especially, it is important that we are intentional in acknowledging that the difficulty of the material has nothing to do with the grade level of the standard or the age at which people typically learn a concept.
- Foster agency. Give students choices of tasks or activities. Remind students that they can choose strategies that make sense to them.

### Ponder:

How does it affect your classroom culture when students feel capable?

How does feeling capable help students grow as independent learners?



Students who aren't feeling capable may challenge you to show that they can't be pushed around or may show that you can't make them do anything by passively resisting—forgetting their work or not listening. This may make you feel angry. To stay focused on helping the student feel capable, imagine the student wearing a sign that says, "I want to feel capable. Involve me. Give me choices."



## Count

Students who feel that they count in the classroom feel valued, like they will be missed if they don't show up, and like their contribution makes a difference. Students who feel that they count are likely to participate in discussions, asking questions and sharing their ideas even if they aren't sure they have "the right answers" because they know that their community is interested in what they have to say. It hurts to feel like one doesn't matter, and a student who doesn't feel that they count in the classroom may try to hurt back. Have you ever had a student who pushed back against activities you worked hard on, saying you should just teach and not try to make them figure it out themselves? That student may have been trying to hurt you because they feel hurt. A student who feels that they count can say with conviction, "I believe that I matter and I can make a difference."

### How to Help Our Students Feel That They Count

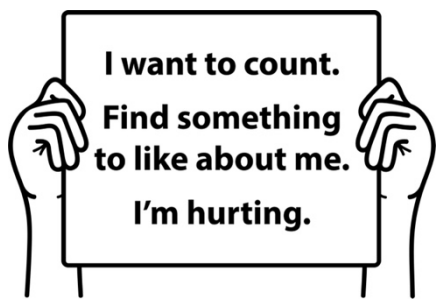
Here are some strategies that can help students feel that they count in the adult math classroom:

- Give students meaningful responsibility in the classroom. For example, ask a student to check your work, to be responsible for making sure everyone in their group understands, or to keep an eye on the clock for you.
- Invite students' input into how the classroom runs. Do we need more time with this concept before we move on to the next activity? Do we need to take a break now?
- Agree on classroom norms together instead of setting rules for your students.
- Notice when students don't make it to class. Welcome them back and tell them you missed them. If possible, connect with them over email or by phone while they are out and let them know you are looking forward to having them back in class—or ask another student to reach out to them.
- Celebrate students' contributions to collective learning. Thank a student for catching your error, for bringing up a new way of thinking about a concept, for sharing what they learned from a mistake.
- Name strategies after students. When a student shares an approach, give them ownership of it, "What do you think of using Tanya's strategy here?"

#### Ponder:

How does it affect your classroom culture when students feel that they count?

How does feeling that they count help students grow as independent learners?



Students who don't feel that they count may try to prove they are important by pushing you until you lose patience with them. This can feel frustrating. To stay focused on helping the student feel that they count, imagine them wearing a sign that says, "I want to count. Find something to like about me. I'm hurting."



# Courage

Students who have courage exhibit resilience. In spite of feeling anxiety or fear around learning math, a student with courage can overcome that fear and exhibit confidence and hope. Students who have courage are persistent and willing to take on challenges. They will engage in problem-solving tasks even when they do not know “the steps” or when the way forward is not clear. A student who does not have courage may give up, avoid challenges, defer to classmates who they perceive as more capable, or stop coming to class. Have you ever had a student who seemed to give up before they even got started? That student may have felt discouraged and may even have been trying to get you to give up on them because they’d already given up on themselves. Students who are discouraged may prefer to have you give up on them than to fail and confirm their own self-doubt. A student who has courage can say with conviction, “I believe that I can handle what comes.”

## How to Help Our Students Develop Courage

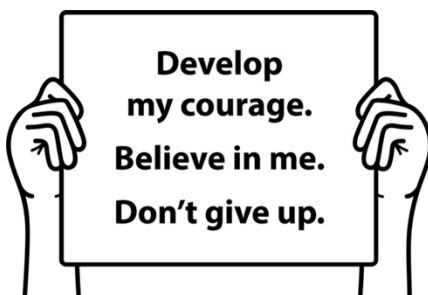
Here are some strategies for helping students develop courage in the adult math classroom:

- Have the courage to be imperfect yourself. Show that you don’t expect perfection in yourself or in your students.
- Have an asset orientation instead of a deficit orientation. Focus on students’ strengths.
- Avoid comparing students and encourage them not to compare themselves to others. In an adult math classroom, everyone comes from a different place. Help students see that it is unreasonable to expect that everyone will grasp concepts at the same time or move at the same pace.
- In your interactions with students, ask yourself:
  - Am I inspiring self-evaluation or dependence on others’ evaluation?
  - Am I respectful or am I patronizing?
  - Am I seeing the student’s point of view or only my own?
  - Would I say this to a friend?
- Avoid debilitating help such as doing for the student what they can do for themselves or rescuing students from their errors or misunderstandings.

### Ponder:

How does it affect your classroom culture when students have courage?

How does having courage help students grow as independent learners?



Students who don’t have courage may try to preserve their self-esteem by giving up on themselves before you can give up on them. These are the students who won’t even pick up the pencil (or won’t put down their calculator) because they don’t want to confirm that they aren’t smart enough by trying and failing. When you have a student who won’t even try, it is easy to feel hopeless and discouraged. To stay focused on helping this student develop courage, imagine them wearing a sign that says, “Develop my courage. Believe in me. Don’t give up.”