Leading a Workshop on Conflict Management for Teaching Assistants

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The aim of this article is to share a conflict management workshop that the authors developed to train teaching assistants to proactively manage conflict, achieve productive results for conflict, and establish a climate of trust in which relationships beneficial to learning can flourish. The article begins by defining an approach to conflict management and explaining the rationale behind the workshop. A detailed plan of the workshop is then presented. Finally, results are reported of a "before the workshop" and "after the workshop" survey from two recent groups of workshop participants that shows improved perceived ability to deal effectively with conflict.

Conflict is an inevitable and necessary component of engaging tutorials and discussion groups dealing with material that is relevant to students' lives, and affects students personally, captures students' interest and facilitates learning.[1] That same relevance and ability to affect students can cause strong feelings of commitment to a point of view or position towards the material. Any time there are at least two different points of view on some issue, there is the potential for conflict. Students and faculty often experience even this potential as negative, uncomfortable and undesirable.[2] The challenge for teaching assistants is to create a learning environment in which students are engaged with the material, free to express their opinions and relate their experiences, and remain respectful of both other stu-

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[1] Susan Holton shows how conflict has been a part of higher education since its inception and that many problems faced by academics have centuries-old prototypes. See Holton, 1995c.

[2] For a list of other sources of conflict, see Appendix A: Workshop Tool Kit – Handout 3 – "Common Sources of Conflict".

dents and other opinions.

The key factors in making the environment positive in the classroom are strong leadership, a supportive culture, and the development of community (Holton, 1995a: 92-94). As Susan Holton (1995a: 94) observed, "Where there is a high sense of community, there is low destructive conflict. Where there is little community, there is more conflict." Within the classroom we need a culture that supports and acknowledges diverse views, fosters participation, and deals with conflict openly. The presence of conflict calls for a strong conflict management strategy in order to ensure that this conflict does not negatively impact or diminish the learning that is happening.

Conflict must be understood before it can be managed. Donahue and Kolt (1992: 4) define conflict as "a situation in which interdependent people express (manifest or latent) differences in satisfying their individual needs and interests, and they experience interference from each other in accomplishing these goals." This definition includes elements of conflict that can be found in any classroom, including the tutorial or discussion group.

Teaching assistants in particular may need to develop skills for handling conflict, anger and emotion in assertive, constructive, and productive ways, and to learn to maintain composure when faced with negativity and anger in others.[3] The aim of this article is to share a conflict management workshop that we developed to train teaching assistants to proactively manage conflict, achieve pro-

ductive results for conflict, and establish a climate of trust in which relationships beneficial to learning can flourish. We begin this article by defining our approach to conflict management and explaining the rationale behind the workshop. We then present a detailed plan of the workshop. Finally, we report results of a "before the workshop" and "after the workshop" survey from two recent groups of workshop participants that shows improved perceived ability to deal effectively with conflict. Our hope is that, with the flowchart diagram of the workshop, copies of our handouts, and other resources in our Appendices, the reader will be able to adapt and use this workshop as part of a teaching assistant training program.

The Rationale behind the Workshop

We believe that it is important to strive for conflict management, not resolution. Conflict resolution "implies that it is possible to resolve or get rid of conflict with no carry over of hard feelings and with everyone agreeing that the matter has been resolved or solved." (Simerly, 1998:2.) The focus of our workshop is conflict management. "[O]ne can learn to *manage* conflict for productive results, realizing that the issues related to a particular conflict situation may remain and affect future problem solving." (Simerly, 1998:3.) A diverse group brings many different views. " 'Peace at any price' should not be the guiding principle of conflict management. Too often, conflict is seen only as a negative when, in fact, it can be energizing and productive." (Holton, 1995b: 8.) Even if it were generally possible, it is not likely to be productive to the learning process to achieve consensus on every issue.

A successful educational leader realizes

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[3]Teaching assistants begin with less teaching experience and somewhat less authority than professors command over the group. For a summary of dispute resolution mechanisms used in various campus domains, see Warters, 1995: 71-78. For a comprehensive list of Conflict Management Programs in the United States and Canada, see the "Appendix" of that same volume (97-122).

that it is rarely possible to get all conflict issues resolved with everyone feeling perfectly satisfied with the results. Often some of the conflicting parties may not be entirely satisfied with all the procedures used to manage their conflict. An effective conflict manager works to help the conflicting parties produce *satisficing* decisions rather than *satisfying* decisions. (Simerly, 1998:3.)

We view conflict as a necessary part of the classroom if learning is going on during classroom time. In our experience, however, often conflict is submerged rather than handled openly and directly. In other cases, conflict appears to be accepted or actually cultivated by the instructor, which is not conducive to creativity, risk taking or openness. Conflict can diminish these necessary elements of learning, so that classroom time is wasted in terms of achieving learning goals. In these cases, if learning occurs at all, it is outside of classroom time.

We believe that well-managed conflict is valuable in the education of people in tutorials and discussion groups. Our experience is that people are more receptive and engaged in learning in constructively managed nonthreatening groups. We have found that dealing with conflict in constructive ways encourages cooperative problem solving (see also McCarthy, 1980:1, as quoted in Holton, 1995:9), and that cooperation promotes "the acceptance and enhancement of differences among persons and groups" (Bennis, Benne, and Chen, 1969:152, as quoted in Holton, 1995:9). Along with cooperative problem solving, Johnson, Johnson and Smith (1989, as quoted in Holton, 1995:9) noted five positive functions of dealing with conflict:

"(1) a unifying function resulting from increased group cohesiveness

(2) a group preserving function resulting from prevention of accumulated hostility

(3) an integrative function resulting from stabilization following conflict

(4) a growth function resulting from the promotion of innovation, creativity and change, and

(5) a problem-solving function resulting from facilitation of the process of problem solving."
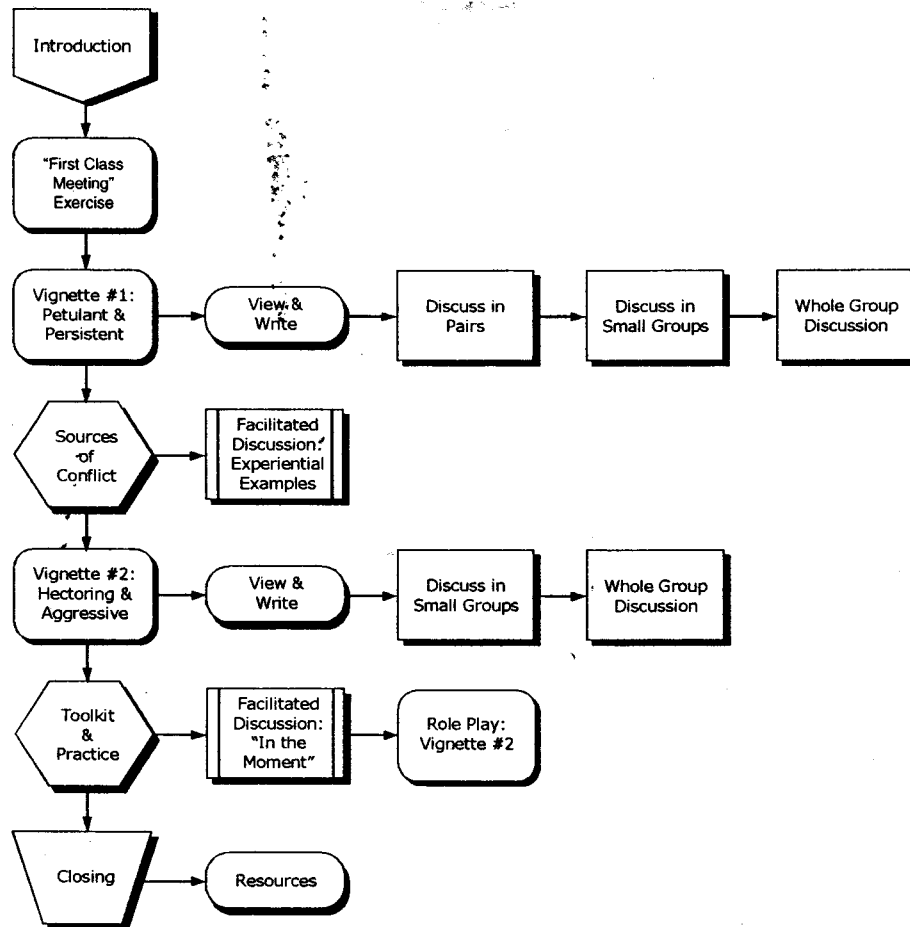
A focus on conflict management, rather than conflict resolution, dictates a predominantly proactive approach. A *proactive approach* anticipates a conflict situation by taking the initiative to put long-term policies, structures or practices in place that anticipate and handle conflict events. In contrast, a *reactive approach* is an immediate solution that responds to problems on the spot, handling conflict as it happens.

As Simerly (1998: 2) notes, "Conflict management involves managing the process in addition to the outcomes of conflict." We have chosen activities within the workshop that address the process and outcome elements of Simerly's definition, while also meeting our objectives for teaching assistants, which are:

(1) To learn proactive conflict management skills;

(2) To practice skills that enable the group to achieve productive outcomes during situations of conflict; and

(3) To develop some attitudes about what sort of climate is desirable in order to support learning in the classroom.

The workshop consists of four main segments, introduced below and described more fully in the next section (See Figure 1, p. 42):

Figure 1

Workshop Structure

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Introduction
   ↓
"First Class Meeting" Exercise
   ↓
Vignette #1: Petulant & Persistent → View & Write → Discuss in Pairs → Discuss in Small Groups → Whole Group Discussion
   ↓
Sources of Conflict → Facilitated Discussion: Experiential Examples
   ↓
Vignette #2: Hectoring & Aggressive → View & Write → Discuss in Small Groups → Whole Group Discussion
   ↓
Toolkit & Practice → Facilitated Discussion: "In the Moment" → Role Play: Vignette #2
   ↓
Closing → Resources
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(1) The "'First Class Meeting' Exercise" (modeled for the whole group by workshop leaders);

(2) Video vignettes, discussion, brainstorming, and using snowballing (think, pair, share, write) group work;

(3) Facilitated discussion (using snowballing); and

(4) Role-playing (group work).

In the remainder of this section, we will link each activity to the learning goals and pedagogical principles that underlie our design. Throughout the rest of the paper, "participant" refers to the teaching assistant workshop participant, and "student" refers to the undergraduate students in the TA's discussion group.

Participants learn how to proactively manage conflict at the opening of the workshop during the "'First Class Meeting' Exercise" that teaching assistants can use to avoid or minimize a great deal of potential conflict.[4] We chose and developed this exercise based on our belief that the first class of

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[4] For other First-Meeting Exercises, see Scholl-Buckwald, 1985.

a course sets the tone for student perception and attitudes, factors critical to learning throughout the term. As Stephen Scholl-Buckwald (1985: 14) observes,

Teachers who consistently have difficulty beginning a class may not recognize these experiences and attitudes [that students bring with them to the classroom], which get in the way of establishing relationships. Students may not give them much help. Many have had years of schooling in mistrust and competition. They walk into a class with expectations that are reasonable, given their experiences.

Students enter every classroom on the first day with at least four questions (Scholl-Buckwald, 1985:14): Is this class going to meet my needs? Is the teacher competent? Is she or he fair? Will she or he care about me? Most instructors do not capitalize on this opportunity to answer these questions and establish positive connections with and among students. Those who do address these questions may still neglect to use this first class meeting to prevent conflict proactively.

In the "'First Class Meeting' Exercise," we demonstrate the process of developing a values inventory, mission statement, ethics policy and code of conduct for the discussion group. These commonalities are the building blocks to overcoming divisiveness that may arise in the future, addressing potential disagreement in the discussion group over such things as ideas, goals, methods, and values. Moreover, because the workshop leaders actually model the process for it, teaching assistants have the chance to experience the teaching practice and that experience can form the basis for further reflection.[5]

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[5] For a thorough treatment of critical reflection as a means of improving teaching practice, see Brookfield, 1995.

Thus, the opening part of the workshop serves two purposes. It gives teaching assistants both a proactive strategy for managing conflict, and allows them to experience the teaching practice. The process of this group exercise develops the group's purpose, and the outcome is a structure for recognizing and accommodating any differences in ways that satisfy the differing parties involved. In our experience using the "'First Class Meeting' Exercise," spending time working on how the group will interact is an effective way to prevent potential long-term misunderstandings, disruptive behavior and short-term hostility and anger.

We meet our second objective by allowing participants to practice skills that enable the group to achieve productive outcomes in situations of conflict throughout the workshop. For example, in the "'First Class Meeting' Exercise", participants have the opportunity to think ahead about and prevent some potential sources of conflict in the discussion group. Students in the participants' discussion groups are more likely to constructively respond to conflict when they themselves have defined what sorts of behavior they will hold each other accountable to. This proactive conflict management strategy in the first meeting "determines the effectiveness of solutions as well as the willingness of conflicting parties to accept these solutions" (Simerly, 1998:2).

Participants can get more practice with these skills in the video vignette segment of the workshop, which employs discussion and brainstorming to develop alternative actions for dealing with difficult situations when they happen. The vignettes create a common experience that illustrates conflict-escalation actions with several alternatives that could generate a good outcome, and participants discuss these using the snowballing technique process (also known as the "think-write-pair-share"). We have participants

share their experience with examples of the sources of conflict in a facilitated discussion, which is another opportunity to pull together the knowledge they already have regarding conflict management.

During the role-playing segment, participants can develop and practice alternative actions for dealing with difficult situations when they happen and practice the skill of reacting effectively during conflict situations. These segments provide the experiences that teaching assistants can critically examine to develop their own conflict management personalities,[6] to encourage proactive conflict management, and to constructively respond to negativity and anger in others.

Our final training objective is to provide the opportunity for teaching assistants to develop attitudes about a classroom climate of trust in which relationships beneficial to learning can flourish. By allowing teaching assistants to experience beginning the workshop with discussion rather than lecture, the "'First Class Meeting' Exercise" quickly involves participants and sends the bigger message that we value group involvement, just as it would in their discussion groups.[7] The snowballing group work structure of the exercise also helps participants to become more relaxed and comfortable working together, by increasing the size of the group gradually.

Another affective aspect reflects what it means to be a "conscientious moral agent"

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[6]In every instance of presenting this workshop, we have witnessed participants openly recognize, share and compare their own personal conflict comfort threshold. We believe this is an important step in developing and evolving their conflict management personalities.

[7]Stephen Brookfield challenges the assumption that discussion group work facilitates learning more effectively, and is more personal for students, than the lecture format. See Brookfield, 1995: 2-7.

(Rachels, 1986:11), and thus teaches the value of conflict management. This happens through the process and outcomes of modeling the "'First Class Meeting' Exercise," and developing alternative actions for dealing with difficult situations, and role-playing various ways of handling negativity and anger in others. These activities highlight and acknowledge the communication of values that occurs continuously in what a teaching assistant does while leading discussion groups.

> If teaching occurs, moral values are present, though frequently these values go unacknowledged. "Can ethics be taught?" is a conceptually confused question. Ethics are taught. Moreover, moral values are taught and cannot fail to be taught in the sense that such values permeate teacher-student relationships and the ethos, methods, and objectives of the classroom.
>
> The urgent questions are what moral values are taught, and what theory of education will be rich enough to reflect this practice. (Churchill, 1982: 306.)

The workshop contains learning processes that model James Rachels' minimum conception of morality: "at the very least the effort to guide one's conduct by reason—that is, to do what there are the best reasons for doing—while giving equal weight to the interests of each individual who will be affected by one's conduct." (Rachels, 1986:11.)

We have designed the workshop to address both participation and development. Throughout the workshop, we utilize several different modes of delivering the content, alternating from passive listening (about 25%) through creative thinking and discussion (50%) to intense role-playing (20%) (the final 5% is administrative—introductions, resources, etc.). We gradually move from the more comfortable modes of independent

work into progressively more interactive work, cycling back to less interaction to draw people in. A simultaneous benefit from this approach is that people do not have to be "on" all the time; they are given breaks from the more interactive aspects of the workshop, which allows time for reflection and review of previous learning or attitudes.

Finally, the workshop follows Kolb's model of the learning process (Kolb, 1979: 37-38). In the beginning, we share some concrete experiences (the "'First Class Meeting' Exercise," the video vignettes), which provide a focal point for observation and reflection. The discussion of the vignettes and the facilitated discussion of sources of conflict allow participants to form abstract concepts or theories about conflict and interaction. The role-playing provides a situation in which to test out new hypotheses regarding conflict management.

workshop version of this process. Formulating a mission statement is, however, a strong way to solidify commitment to group process in a longer dynamic, such as a 13-week tutorial or discussion group class. Refer to Table 2 (p. 46) for the Values Inventory that accompanies the likes and dislikes in Table 1. From this list of values, we ask participants to suggest consensual Ground Rules, which all members of the group share the responsibility to enforce.

The entire process, applied to this workshop, demonstrates experientially the steps for proactively establishing a code of behavior for the workshop. Our own experience with this process is that it sets an unmistakable tone of respect and productivity in the global workshop process. It simultaneously sends a strong meta-message that contributions are valued and that this environment is a safe one in which to participate.

Segments of the Workshop

1. The "'First Class Meeting' Exercise"

The proactive "First Class Meeting" exercise is a facilitated whole-group discussion that teaching assistants can restructure and use for their own group (See Appendix B: Workshop Tool Kit — Handout 1 — "Managing conflict proactively" for a blueprint of the exercise.). We start by asking the group to identify positive and negative features of workshops they have attended in the past. Table 1 gives the outcome of this process from a recent presentation of our workshop.

The likes and dislikes gives the foundation for constructing a Values Inventory, and discussing a Purpose/Mission Statement for the group, a step we typically omit in our

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Table 1

A Recent List of Workshop Dislikes and Likes

Dislikes

- One or two people dominate discussion
- Power dynamics: Gender interruption
- Side conversations: not focusing or listening (disrespect)
- Presenter lack of interest
- Lack of respect for ideas
- Presenter unprepared
- Participants NOT participating (silent response)

Likes

- Leader on time and prepared
- Questions are repeated so group can hear
- People's comments are brief & to the point
- Regular breaks to refocus

Table 2
Values Inventory

- We are all heard: everyone has a voice
- We are all equals: we all bring equally valid things to the workshop
- We value focus
- We value commitment: in coming prepared, on time, and ready to participate
- We value tolerance and not blocking communication

The real value of this process comes sharply into focus if during the workshop someone in the group "breaks" one of the consensual rules. This gives us an opportunity to model respectful yet firm rule enforcement.

2. Video Vignettes

After modeling the "'First Class Meeting' Exercise", participants view two 3- to 5- minute video vignettes that capture the essence of conflict (*Critical Incidents I*, 1992). Both are about grade complaints. We intentionally simplify conflict to this situation in order to broaden our concepts without pretending to generalize it to all situations. Participants can take that natural step in their own time.

Participants have a worksheet with organizing questions related to the vignettes that they can fill in while watching the video (See Appendix B: Workshop Tool Kit – Handout 2 – "Vignette Worksheets"). We give a moment more to make notes on what they saw before asking participants to pair up and discuss the questions and their answers. Then we move to a larger group format and discuss observations in a whole-group plenary.

The grouping for the second vignette, which we generally view after the facilitated discussion about the sources of conflict, is slightly different. We omit the pairing step and go straight to larger groups of four or five people after individual reflection. We

notice that generally the plenary discussion is more efficient for the second vignette than for the first, because participants are more familiar with the task and each other.

3. Facilitated Discussion About Sources of Conflict

The next section of the workshop consists of facilitated discussion about the sources of conflict in the classroom, which we guide using an overhead and accompanying handout listing some common sources of conflict (See Appendix B: Workshop Tool Kit – Handout 3 – "Common Sources of Conflict"). We define these sources of conflict by eliciting examples from the participants' own teaching experiences. This process aims to clarify the variety and complexity of conflict situations and teaching tensions facing the teaching assistant.[8]

Participants' examples often contain illustrations of the particular sort of interdependence that exists between teaching assistant and student regarding issues such as grading, failure to establish boundaries, and hidden agendas. At this point in the workshop, helpful cases begin to emerge that demonstrate the differences between manifest or openly expressed conflict, and latent or hidden conflict. Also, the discussion reveals a tension between "students' private self-con-

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[8]For a comprehensive and insightful discussion of teaching tensions, see Weimer, 1990.

cept (identity) and their public presentation of self" (Chesler and Zuniga, 1991:174).

4. Role-playing

Despite well-planned, proactive conflict management measures, teaching assistants may still need to respond to negativity and anger in others on the spot. Role-playing helps participants hone the responsive skills of genuine listening, changing perceptions, channeling energy constructively, and converting negatives, that can be called upon "in the moment" as the conflict unfolds. To prepare participants for this, we briefly review a handout of some strategies and techniques. (See Appendix B: Workshop Tool Kit – Handout 4 – "Responding to Negativity and Anger in Others" for a summary of responsive strategies.) Then we divide the group into several smaller groups of seven to twelve people. Usually we need to separate the groups spatially so that they may work without disturbing each other. We use the situations in the video vignettes as a starting scenario for people to work with, and ask them to reenact the vignette with a more effective response than that portrayed by the discussion leader in the video. We allow a short plenary discussion afterwards, to allow participants to process the role-playing experience.

This is the most active and, we think, the most productive segment of the workshop. Participants enjoy trying more positive responses to the conflict situation that they have just viewed and discussed. We endow the group with the right to tag a role player's shoulder and cut in, taking the scenario in a different direction or repeating it a different way whenever and as often as they wish. We find it helpful to model the role playing process first, so that participants grasp the practice of "tagging" or "freezing." The groups are energetic, active and stimu-

lated by new ideas. Often, people are surprised to find the role-playing to be a positive experience that demonstrates that they are better at dealing with conflict than they initially thought.

Participants' Perception of Ability to Handle Conflict

We surveyed our participants to see how well the workshop accomplished the goal of making participants more comfortable with conflict (See Appendix B: Evaluation Forms for copies of the workshop evaluation forms.). Before the workshop started, we asked them to answer three questions on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being "strongly disagree" and 5 being "strongly agree":

1) I am comfortable with conflict when challenged.
2) I can keep my cool when conflict heats up.
3) I can deal with conflict before it happens.

We repeated these questions at the end of the workshop.

The totals for the before and after survey for two recent offerings of the workshop are in Tables 3 and 4. In no case did a participant indicate a lower number after the workshop as compared with before the workshop. The averages (calculated means) of the survey responses support the conclusion that people in both groups end the workshop agreeing more strongly with all three of these statements in both groups. In order to determine if this interpretation is statistically meaningful, we performed a one-tailed test of the hypothesis that the two means were equal. The alternative hypothesis is that the responses from after the workshop were

higher than those given before the workshop. This null hypothesis (third column) is generally not significant even at 10% level. In other words, for these samples, there is at least a 90% probability that the two means are drawn from the same probability distribution; that is, there is no statistical evidence that the two means are different. Because of the low level of response variation in the design (ranging from 1-5), we cannot conclude statistically for either the York or McMaster University group, that they actually do agree more strongly with each of the questions.

Comments from participants at a very large workshop (Brock University, February 13, 1999, 35 participants) indicated that our workshop is moving participants in the direction of becoming more consciously competent at dealing with difficult situations. That is also the conclusion we draw from the reported results of surveying the small numbers of participants at York University and at McMaster University.

Conclusion

Any shared task has the potential for conflict. Competitiveness, divisiveness, and adversarial positions, where interaction is taken as a zero sum game and winning the argument is elevated over group problem solving, has the potential to diminish learning. Discussion groups that spend time in problem-solving or discussion will almost surely find that conflict will be present, if the teaching assistants are actively involving the students in their groups.

Creating a positive tutorial or discussion group environment is essential to facilitating learning. Ironically, it is those settings in which the free interchange of ideas and opinions is encouraged that are most likely to involve overt conflict. The solution is not to suppress expression, which would impa group learning and defeat the purpose of discussion group, because this would merel push the conflict under the surface and int students' attitudes, with attendant negativ effects on individual learning. In this work shop, we hope we have communicated the the best outcomes derive from actively ac knowledging and confronting conflict, eithe proactively (before it happens) or reactivel (during conflict episodes), to shape it so the it can stimulate thought and learning.

A strong feature of the workshop w have described is its proactive and anticipa tory focus. A lot of potential conflict can b eliminated by thinking through the nature c conflict and using that learning to diffus situations before they happen. We have use these techniques with nine different group in the past year, and all but one of these foun the workshop to be highly useful. The highe the proportion of teaching assistants in th workshop, the higher the ratings for useful ness in our evaluations.

Accepting the value of conflict and it necessity to the full spectrum of human in teraction permits the teaching assistant to encourage the positive and constructive as pects of conflict and manage the destructiv conflict. This increases understanding, alter native solutions, creative thinking and stu dent involvement. We believe these benefit are well worth the 90 to 120 minutes' work shop time to develop them.

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Table 3
Summary of Workshop Effectiveness Survey, York University, September 1, 1999

Question	Before Workshop m_B (n=13)	After Workshop m_A (n=13)	Standard Error $(m_B - m_A)$	Test statistic $H_0: m_B - m_A = 0$	Significant at 90%? $(t_{.10;\,12\,df} = -1.356)$
1	3.4	4.1	0.947	-0.73	no
2	4.0	4.5	0.749	-0.62	no
3	3.5	4.1	0.967	-0.56	no

Note: Standard Error is calculated for 13 individual before and after responses.

Table 4
Summary of Workshop Effectiveness Survey, McMaster University, June 10, 1999

Question	Before Workshop m_B (n=7)	After Workshop m_A (n=7)	Standard Error $(m_B - m_A)$	Test Statistic $H_0: m_B - m_A = 0$	Significant at 90%? $(t_{.10;\,6\,df} = -1.440)$
1	2.9	3.1	0.756	-0.38	no
2	3.1	3.4	1.113	-0.26	, no
3	3.6	3.9	0.488	-0.59	no

Note: Standard Error is calculated for 7 individual before and after responses.

Table 5
Summary of Workshop Effectiveness Survey, McMaster University, September 8, 1999

Question	Before Workshop m_B (n=18)	After Workshop m_A (n=18)	Standard Error $(m_B - m_A)$	Test Statistic $H_0: m_B - m_A = 0$	Significant at 90%? $(t_{.10;\,17\,df} = -1.333)$
1	2.7	3.8	0.676	-1.64	no
2	3.3	4.0	0.485	-1.37	no
3	3.0	4.0	0.882	-1.10	no

Note: Standard Error is calculated for 18 individual before and after responses.

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Appendix A: Workshop Tool Kit

Handout 1: Managing Conflict Proactively

MANAGING CONFLICT PROACTIVELY

What strategies and techniques can you use during the introductory class to prevent potential conflict in the long term?

The introductory class sets the tone for student perception and attitudes, factors vitally involved in learning, throughout the term. That first meeting offers invaluable opportunities to establish positive connections among students and to prevent conflict proactively.

PURPOSE, VALUES & GROUND RULES

(Adapted from *The Zen of Groups*, by Dale Hunter, Anne Bailey and Bill Taylor. Copyright 1995. Fisher Books. ISBN-1-55561-100-1. All rights reserved. Used by permission.)

Establishing a purpose, vision and clarity in the introductory class can prevent some misunderstandings, disruptive behavior, hostility and anger.

Step 1: Snowballing Small Group Exercise
- Ask students to pair up with the person beside them and answer the following questions: "What sort of occurrences have you disliked in past classes" (e.g., one person dominating the class) and "What sorts of occurrences have you liked in past classes, or what should happen in the ideal class" (e.g., everyone's voice is respected; people don't interrupt each other). ·
- Then, ask the pairs to join up with another pair or two, depending on the size of the classroom. These pairs are to share their findings in these larger groups, and write their answers on the board for all others to see.
- Finally, all small groups reconvene into a large plenary session consisting of the whole class. The board should be filled with lists of the "likes" and "dislikes."

Step 2: Values Inventory
- Ask students to help you pull out a list of group values from the "likes" and "dislikes" lists. Values are single-word reflections of behaviors, such as "punctuality" or "respect."
- Identify a class purpose are some values about things which have brought the group together.
- It will be useful to identify these values and seek agreement on those most relevant and important to the group mission statement.

Step 3: Code of Conduct/Ethics Policy
- Ask the students to help you draw out an informal code of conduct or ethics policy

based on the students' values; e.g., no interrupting, no lateness - warn the class if you are going to be late.

- You can use this opportunity to set ground rules at the first meeting.
- Ground rules are best kept to a minimum and need to be written down and handed out to all students.
- Drawing attention to broken ground rules early in the life of the group helps to educate and remind students of the values that they agreed to be held accountable to.
- Ground rules need to be relevant or it's best not to set them.

Step 4: Mission Statement
- Once you have written a values inventory and ethics policy, next co-write a mission statement for the class.
- You need to discuss and clarify this mission statement so that all group members are aligned with it, and have helped to write it.
- If the mission statement of the class remains unclear, you may discover that there is no purpose in having the class.
- Keep the mission statement short and succinct – expressed in one or two sentences.
- Make sure that the mission statement is written down and handed out in a final copy to all of the students.
- As well as group mission, it is useful to develop specific class assignments which lead towards realizing the purpose.

Step 5: Create Handout
- The final step is to type out the values inventory, code of conduct and mission statement and hand it out to all students in the class.
- It is easier to hold students accountable to a written document.

AGENDA SETTING

(Adapted from *The Zen of Groups*, by Dale Hunter, Anne Bailey and Bill Taylor. Copyright 1995. Fisher Books. ISBN-1-55561-100-1. All rights reserved. Used by permission.)

It is useful at the first meeting to decide how the agenda will be set throughout the duration of the course. Spelling this out, or deciding together reduces the potential for misunderstandings. Will the agenda for the class be open and decided collectively on a weekly basis, or prearranged by you and/or the students, and/or circulated in advance.

DECISION MAKING

(Adapted from *The Zen of Groups*, by Dale Hunter, Anne Bailey and Bill Taylor. Copyright 1995. Fisher Books. ISBN-1-55561-100-1. All rights reserved. Used by permission.)

How will decisions be made in the class? Will you make them? Will they be made collectively? By the majority? Or on a sub-group basis?

SUPPORT SYSTEMS

Beginning to plant support systems in the first meeting creates a positive classroom environment in which students feel comfortable to speak their mind and propose new ideas.

Ombudsperson

- Set up an Ombudsperson system in the first meeting. Leave the room for a couple of minutes and allow the students decide on an Ombudsperson amongst themselves. The Ombudsperson will volunteer to record anonymous comments, suggestions or complaints from students who feel uncomfortable about approaching you, and keep you informed of them.

E-mail Lists

- Ask students if they would like you to circulate a list of e-mail addresses. Then send a piece of paper around the class and allow students to decide if they want to be part of such a list.
- In cases where it is possible and students are interested and willing, set up an e-mail list for students to informally discuss classroom issues and keep on top of work that they have missed.
- The above strategies will help to create a sense of community in the classroom.

Campus Resources

- Share campus resources with the students at the first meeting: e.g., the location and hours of the center for academic writing or essay writing clinic.

Handout 2: Vignette Worksheets

PETULANT AND PERSISTENT - #4

A petulant and persistent student is complaining to a professor about a grade that she has been given for an assignment in his course.

Questions:

1. Make brief notes of specific teacher and student behavior you see.

_____
_____
_____
_____

2. Write down what you see the instructor doing that is:
   (a) Effective _____
   _____
   (b) Ineffective_____
   _____

3. What guidelines can you use to handle grade complaints?

_____
_____
_____
_____

4. What can you do to minimize grade complaints?

_____
_____
_____
_____

HECTORING AND HARASSMENT - #5

An aggressive male student is contesting a grade that he has been given by a female faculty member.

Questions:

1. Make brief notes of specific teacher and student behavior you see.
   _____
   _____
   _____
   _____
   _____

2. Write down what you see the instructor doing that is:
   (a) Effective _____
   _____
   (b) Ineffective_____
   _____

3. How should one respond if a grade complaint moves toward intimidation and harassment?
   _____
   _____
   _____
   _____
   _____

4. What can you do to maintain an appropriate degree of formality/informality and respect in faculty-student relationships?
   _____
   _____
   _____
   _____
   _____

Handout 3: Common Sources of Conflict

COMMON SOURCES OF CONFLICT

Most of these common sources of conflict can be avoided by anticipating them and being proactive. Because conflict is often experienced as negative, uncomfortable or undesirable, we often have to overcome our own negative feelings in order to be able to handle it well. Consider for a moment what a dull world we would have if no one disagreed. Starting from that level of conflict, you may be able to view conflict as a necessary part of forming a balanced opinion. Find a way to manage conflict so that it is productive, not nasty!

Misunderstanding

⇨When what is sent is not received; also, when the communication lacks clarity.

Example: a class prepares the wrong section of the textbook for the week's discussion; a student mistakes a TA's question as criticism when none was intended.

* Either you could have misspoken without notice, or you may have missed visual cues that your group don't understand what you are saying.
* There are six versions of any communication: what the speaker says, what tge speaker thinks they said, what the speaker thinks was heard by the listener, what the listener hears, what the listener thinks they heard, what the listener thinks the speaker said!
* Clarify your intent to yourself so that it can be communicated unambiguously.

Dishonesty

⇨When one is dishonest about what one has learned, what one feels, or what one is going to do.

Example: a homework assignment is given, students struggle with it expecting it to be worth 15% as in the syllabus, but it is not graded for marks.

This includes failures to say things that might be important (leaving things unspoken).

* Dishonesty is a sure fire way to generate conflict.
* Covert dishonesty is usually discovered, and the resulting conflict is amplified.

Negligence

⇨When one fails to take reasonable steps to carry out what is needed to ensure good discussion.

Example: coming to class unprepared, failing to carry out an assigned group role woth due diligence.

* If you give your word, keep it.
* Avoid sexist/racist language

- Everyone in the group has a responsibility to take the time to prepare adequately, in the interests of good group function.

Intention

⇨When one knowingly or unknowingly compromises someone else's best enterest through their communication.

Example: A student expressing suspicion about a particular issue, insults someone in the group without intending to.

- You may not be aware of your intent, or you may not have examined it (e.g., "my students are lazy").
- Your effect may be different than your intent.
- You are responsible for the effect.
- Intent may be completely positive but have conflict-creating effects (e.g., pulling the dominant person in the group aside for a word with the intent of improving discussion).

Exclusive Investment in One's Beliefs

⇨ When one is unwilling or unable to hear other points of view.

Example: a speaker believes in postmodermism of feminism so strongly that other viewpoints are silenced.

- Either because you need to be right or you want this particular issue to be resolved a particular way.
- Closes your mind to alternative points, arguments of possibilities.
- Biases what you hear, even if you sincerely believe it and are not simply being stubborn.
- Can keep you from learning what others take for granted.
- Impedes the creative thought process.
- Agree to disagree if you simply cannot listen neutrally.

Failure to Establish Boundaries

⇨When one does not express limits on what is acceptable in terms of discussion or actions.

Example: students telephone the TA late at night; a dominate student interrupts a speaker mid-sentence.

- When people cross boundaries that you have, it can make you feel uncomfortable or anxious.
- You may not know what the problem is.
- By the same token, if someone is acting anxious for no apparent reason, you may have crossed aboundary that was not explicity clarified (and therefore that you couldn't have respected!).

Unwillingness to Deal with Conflict

⇨When conflict is present, but denied, accepted or ignored because one is uncomfortable with dealing with it.

Example: Students in a discussion group are expressing hostility, but the TA behaves as if everything is just fine

- Guaranteed to make the conflict larger and more difficult to convert to a constructive experience.
- It is disrespectful to the group to allow conflict to simmer without addressing it directly.
- Get used to the role you have as a TA: use the group process to help deal with the cinflict (your students can solve the conflict with your support).
- Responsibility for good group process includes responsibility to deal with conflict.
- Consider checking in with students every week or so: are people experiencing the discussion as you perceive it?
- Conflict is a fundamental part of the group process: it's not necessarily bad, especially if you manage it!

Fear

⇨When fear is present in strong emotions that interfeve with group communication.

Example: fear that someone will "find out" that you don't know the answer may make you act unnaturally defensive.

- Conflict feels threatening to many, so fear may seem natural.
- Can block effective communication and cause frustration and conflict.
- Can also cause "knee-jerk" reactions: words or actions regretted later.

Hidden Agendas

⇨When the true motivation for a course of action or intention of a statement is not disclosed.

Example: Telling the class that this material is not on the exam, to avoid having to prepare the material for classroom learning; a student says, "Let's look at this" and starts talking about their term paper topic.

- People experience hidden agendas as manipulation.
- Sometimes hidden agenda is simply an unexplained motive.

Handout 4: Responding to Negativity & Anger in Others

RESPONDING TO NEGATIVITY & ANGER IN OTHERS

What strategies and techniques can you use on the spot to handle negativity and anger directed at you by others?

If you want to do more than just cope or contend with negativity and anger on a short-term basis, then you need to learn to maintain composure, develop assertive behavior, and replace negative behavior with constructive responses.

Developing Assertive Behavior

	Aggressive	Passive	Assertive
Thoughts	I am better than... –They are stupid	I am not good enough... –Why bother; oh, well	We are both important... –Both must know that they will be heard
Words	You make me angry... –Attacking words –You are wrong –Put downs	I can't... –I am wrong –Wouldn't work –We'll do it your way	I believe we can... –We both have a point –I believe that we can solve this –I understand how you could feel that way
Actions	Shouting –Bullying –Facial expressions –Slamming things –Getting too close to personal space	Silence –Chronic withdrawal –Agreement –Avoidance –Averting eyes –Minimal body language	Calm –Engaging in dialogue –Active listening and speaking –Calm, purposeful action

Maintaining Composure

Step One: Genuine Listening
✔ Begin by listening attentively without agreement or interruption.
  • Examples:
    • Explore the issue from the other person's point of view.
    • Acknowledge the other person's position/interests – you don't have to agree with them, just acknowledge that they have them.

Step Two: Changing Perceptions
✔ After genuine listening, try to change the way that the other person sees, hears and understands the situation.

- Examples:
  - Try to find some sort of common ground, even if that common ground may seem to you to be a platitude, i.e., "I'm sure that we both value a good outcome..." This might be enough to change the other person's perception of the situation.
  - Turn their perception into its opposite—if they are distressed by something, explain how the situation can be viewed as a learning experience.
  - Show the person that there are other ways of looking at the situation that are neither hostile, angry, nor distressing.

Step Three: Channeling Energy Constructively

✔ Once you have begun changing the other person's perceptions of the situation, begin channeling the hostile, angry or aggressive energy constructively. Use your energy in problem solving.
  - Examples:
    - Suggest different concrete outcomes to the situation.
    - Propose several solutions with time frames.
    - Take a break and suggest further discussion at a later time, and follow up with arranged and specific time frames and solutions.

Step Four: Converting Negatives

✔ Close by turning the negatives into positives, that is, make a conscious effort to systematically explain the ways in which the negative views that the other person came into the situation with have turned out to be positive.
  - Examples:
    - Thank the person for bringing this to your attention.
    - Indicate that other students may have the same concerns but may be less comfortable bringing these concerns forward.

Taking Seriously vs. Taking Personally

Taking a situation seriously means being concerned with a solution and results. Taking a situation personally means being concerned with and internalizing a message to the point of ego damage or self-sabotage. The difference is between a situation-based orientation and an ego-based orientation.

Negative Behavior	Constructive Response
Increase in Volume	Decrease in Volume
	Reduce the volume of your own voice in response to an increase in volume in the other person's voice.
Focus on Emotion	Focus on Facts
	As the other person or you become more emotional, keep directing the other person, and yourself via self-talk, to focus on the facts.

Example: "Give me the facts again."

Remarks About the Person	Remarks About the Situation
Avoid remarks about the person.	
Keep discussion focused on the situation and events.	

Constructive Behavior is concerned with what needs to be resolved and how.

➤ Listen attentively without agreement or interruption
  • Explore the issue from the other person's point of view
  • Listen genuinely
➤ Acknowledge the other person's position/interests
  • Acknowledge that the other person has a different position and interests from you
  • You don't have to agree
➤ Accept the other person's perspective
  • Send a strong message to the other person that you accept that they have a different position and interests from yours while attempting to get back to the facts
  • E.g., I understand that this must be hard...
➤ Avoid accusations
  • Phrase your words so that accusations are removed and facts remain
  • Try to remove blame
➤ State your position/interests
  • This can be the hardest part
➤ Propose a compromise
  • Put forth action towards a solution
➤ Suggest further discussion
  • It is helpful to take a break
➤ Follow up with arranged and specific time frames and solutions that respect both parties involved

Appendix B: Evaluation Forms

How to Manage Conflict, Anger & Emotion in the Classroom

At the Start...

1. I am comfortable with conflict when challenged.

| (1) | (2) | (3) | (4) | (5) |
| Strongly Disagree | | | | Strongly Agree |

2. I can keep my cool when conflict heats up.

| (1) | (2) | (3) | (4) | (5) |
| Strongly Disagree | | | | Strongly Agree |

3. I can deal with conflict before it happens.

| (1) | (2) | (3) | (4) | (5) |
| Strongly Disagree | | | | Strongly Agree |

At the End....
Thank You!

1. I am comfortable with conflict when challenged.

| (1) | (2) | (3) | (4) | (5) |
| Strongly Disagree | | | | Strongly Agree |

2. I can keep my cool when conflict heats up.

| (1) | (2) | (3) | (4) | (5) |
| Strongly Disagree | | | | Strongly Agree |

3. I can deal with conflict before it happens.

| (1) | (2) | (3) | (4) | (5) |
| Strongly Disagree | | | | Strongly Agree |