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Classrooms can serve as laboratories for experimenting with collaboration rather than win-lose conflict styles. For conflict management, the process is the product.

Teacher-Student Confrontations

Joyce L. Hocker

College teachers have always experienced conflicts with their students, both inside and outside of class, and recent years have been no exception. While most teachers expect that teaching and learning will take place in a cooperative atmosphere, struggles and conflicts inevitably occur. They present challenges for practicing what we preach. Their resolution shapes one's teaching style.

The Nature of Conflict in the Teacher-Student Relationship

In a typical interaction between teacher and student, a student questions a grade on a paper:

> *Student:* Could I talk with you about my grade on the first paper?
> *Professor:* Sure, come on in.
> *Student:* I'd like to know your criteria for an A. I worked really hard and thought I'd written an A paper.
> *Professor:* Well, it was a good paper, but it had some flaws. For instance, you had a lot of proofreading errors and you didn't follow the assignment fully. [Explains]

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Student: I didn't know we had to use outside sources.
Professor: I covered that in class. You must have missed it.
Student: Oh. Well, thanks.
Professor: Sure, any time.

The professor will likely assume that the above interaction was a routine inquiry about a grade, in which the student went away satisfied. The student might report to friends that the professor was unclear in class, unfair in applying standards, inconsistent in interpretation of requirements, did not read the paper carefully, or conducted the interview in an arrogant, demeaning manner. For the professor, no important conflict may have occurred; for the student, who may be boiling inside, the episode might be considered "a serious conflict."

Students report more personal involvement in their conflicts with teachers than do teachers; they view tactics used by professors as authoritarian, coercive, and highly powerful (Jamieson and Thomas, 1974). In fact, when students were asked to describe the most negative experiences in their lives (Branon, 1972), one-third mentioned negative interpersonal relations with teachers. During the past decade, students in my conflict management classes have consistently identified interactions with teachers as a sample conflict in which they felt they had little power. Common content areas include the student's trying to get a grade changed or disagreeing with teaching methods or class requirements (Wilmot, 1976), personal conflicts such as wanting to be closer to the teacher, and conflicts over the teacher's time and availability, direction of research, and deadlines.

Students also remember conflicts with teachers as unproductive or even destructive. Almost all students report that they talked, argued, or disagreed with their teachers once. When they were unsuccessful at reaching their goal, they gave up. In one study (Wilmot, 1976), no students mentioned talking to the instructor more than once or expanding their conflict management tactics to include coalition formation or third-party intervention—one exchange with the professor was apparently all they felt safe enough to manage. Most teacher-student conflicts, as reported by students, can be characterized as win-lose, with the conflict being managed through high-powered coercive tactics. According to students, teachers typically escalate the conflict, then use their power over students to force them to back down. Students report feeling anxious, dumb, frustrated, angry, misunderstood, annoyed, hostile, uncomfortable, unsure, helpless, disturbed, mad, sorry, and revengeful (Wilmot, 1976).

The purpose of this chapter is to present typical issues that arise in conflicts inside and outside the classroom, information for analysis of the conflicts, and suggestions for managing them in such a way as to model a process of collaboration rather than reinforcing the win-lose model of conflict management. The reduction of tiresome, predictable, and unproductive conflicts can make the teaching enterprise more energizing instead of draining and can teach students that educated people can work *with* instead of *against* each other. Additionally, teachers who have learned to manage disputes often involve themselves with their students rather than take refuge behind traditional authority roles.

For the purpose of this discussion, conflict will be presented as "an expressed struggle, between at least two interdependent parties, who perceive incompatible goals, scarce rewards, and interference from the other party in achieving their goals" (Hocker and Wilmot, 1985, p. 23). Conflict is present whenever it is communicated, verbally or nonverbally. Conflict includes both content and relationship issues. *Content* issues have to do with the specific subject or information defining the struggle (in the case above, the grade on the paper). *Relationship* issues have to do with who the conflicting parties are in relation to each other—who has more power, who can define the terms, who can choose the tactics, how each will respond to the moves of the other, and whether either party will allow the other to influence them in any way. Content goals can be observed by outsiders to the conflict, whereas relationship goals make sense only in the context of the specific relationship. Usually, the relationship issues arouse more feelings than do the content issues. In the above example, the student may have been implying that the teacher should take responsibility for the lack of clarity experienced by the student, but the teacher tacitly refused to do so. The teacher's relational message may have been, "I did a good job explaining; your performance is your responsibility." The struggle involved a relational issue of responsibility, not only the content issue of the grade, and *both* are real issues.

Conflict can serve as a basis for both productive and destructive activity, depending on how the parties handle their differences. The Chinese ideograph for conflict combines images of danger and opportunity. In the Western world, however, most images that come to mind when the word "conflict" is mentioned are negative, such as anger, hostility, war, tension, destruction, and chaos. Seldom do such images as growth, change, challenge, rebirth, and opportunity come quickly to mind. Yet teachers can learn from conflicts as well as students can, to the betterment of teaching style and understanding of the impact on students. If teachers can learn to move toward situations of conflict for the purpose of understanding and resolution, instead of away from the person who brings conflict into awareness, learning can result from what often begins as a painful and stressful experience.

Productive conflicts. Have you ever experienced a positive, productive conflict with students? If so, you probably learned something, made adjustments in your own communication patterns, and solved a problem. Additionally, you may have felt a sense of heightened trust with the students, more liking for them, and a positive assessment of your own abili-

ties as a communicator. The goals of any productive conflict are to *solve the immediate problem* represented in the conflict and to *enhance the interpersonal relationship* to the extent that such is needed to continue working together. If the problem is solved, but the relationship worsens, the conflict is not settled. Following is a sample of dialogue that might transform the previous case into one that will end productively:

> *Student:* [After formalities] I thought I understood what to do on the paper. I followed the assignment.
> *Teacher:* Tell me your understanding of the paper assignment.
> *Student:* [Does so]
> *Teacher:* I think I see where the problem is. Let's trace back where the confusion came from.

In the replay of the grade conflict scenario, the teacher began to transform the conflict into a potentially productive one by increasing interdependence (working together to trace the root of the conflict), by refusing to define the grade as a scarce resource, by not blocking the student's goals immediately, and by overtly agreeing that a problem existed. Even if the grade does not change, the student's goal of understanding what went wrong will be reached. In all conflicts, the parties must have enough power to solve their problem and enough self-esteem to communicate openly and effectively. The problems of powerlessness and low esteem are core issues in every conflict.

Teachers' Conflict Management Styles

Recently, a professor reported to me an unsatisfactory thesis defense meeting during which the graduate student presented an unacceptable plan for his research. The professor reported the meeting's closing dialogue:

> *Student:* So what do you want me to do to make it acceptable?
> *Professor:* If you don't know that by now, I don't know why we are having this meeting. Produce a valid and reliable design and then I'll see if it's okay.

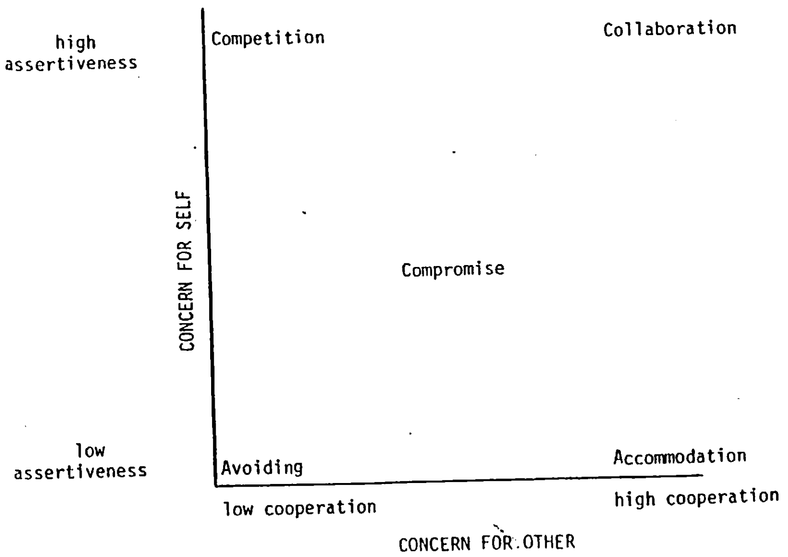
This student and professor were using two different styles for their conflict, styles which were learned as reasonable (if not desirable) for that situation (Schuetz, 1975). Conflict styles are not an inherent part of the personality; rather, they are learned as people encounter life experiences which put them into conflict. The purpose of analyzing one's conflict management style is not to discover underlying personality dynamics but to gain information about what one's repertoire of styles contains.

If one had as models professors who were imperious and demanding but rigorous and fair, one might try to emulate that style in class. If one learned from professors who were empathic and concerned about the personal growth of their students, a different style of conflict might develop. You can expand or modify your conflict style if you notice repeated unproductive conflicts in which you or the student consistently lose esteem, credibility, composure, trust, desired information, or other tangible or intangible losses, such as time.

Five conflict styles can be identified for purposes of analysis. The diagram shown in Figure 1, modified from the work of Kilmann and Thomas (1975), presents the five styles in terms of concern for one's own goals and concern for the other and the relationship.

Each style can be used effectively at some time, depending on the problem and needs of the people. Most professors, one may safely assert, overuse competition and avoidance with their students. As noted in Figure 1, both *competition*, which structures the conflict so that one pursues one's own concerns at the expense of the other, and *avoidance*, characterized by passive, nonassertive behavior, share a common dimension: Both communicate little concern for the other party and for the relationship. The *accommodation* style involves giving in to the other. The concern for the other

Figure 1. Conflict Styles



party and for the relationship is high, but concern for one's own goals is low. *Compromise* is a style highly endorsed by American culture and often works well, since concern for self, other, and the relationship are moderate. However, compromise can often be an "easy out" that does not use the problem-solving abilities of the parties. *Collaboration* shows high concern for the self, for the other, and for the relationship. It is a cooperative, highly involving style, producing solutions that are likely to be accepted by all parties and serve as genuine conflict resolutions (Hocker and Wilmot, 1985). In the example of the thesis meeting, the student used the accommodation style, while the professor used competition. The power structure encouraged the use of these particular styles, but they will most likely produce continued frustration and denigration ("He's a shoddy researcher," or "He's completely impossible to work for").

Your own style of managing conflict can be assessed in several ways. (1) During class evaluations ask students to answer the question, "Comment on my way of handling conflicts with students inside and outside of class." (2) Fill out the Putnam-Wilson Conflict Behavior Scale (1982), which gives information on three styles: solution-orientation, nonconfrontation, and control orientation, which subsume some of the Thomas-Kilmann styles into a validated research instrument. (3) Think back over troubling episodes that seem to happen over and over with your students. One example might be going over a test with the class. Often such sessions, while they provide immediate learning of content material, leave professor and students unsatisfied or even angry. The professor may be on the defensive and thus adopt a competitive style to cope with the demands of the situation. The students may see competition as the only way they can gain points on the quiz and persist in trying to prove a test item to be incorrectly scored or poorly written. A collaborative style can grow from focusing on concepts, making decisions about items in private, and asking students to expand on their questions.

Many people rate themselves as more solution-oriented than others, especially those who have less power, such as students. In the thesis meeting example, the student probably would rate the professor as interested in control, not solutions. The higher-powered party usually tries to remain less involved than the lower-powered party and therefore uses fewer collaborative tactics.

Power Struggles

Power hierarchies exist in all classes. Even professors who model humane and effective teaching use power with students, since they structure the learning environment and, to a large extent, the kinds of conflicts that students may initiate. One undergraduate student reported his assessment of the power structure: "The power difference between us was

nothing less than awesome. I was merely a first quarter freshman and he was "A PROFESSOR." Also, his mastery of the spoken word was vastly superior to mine, and he intimidated me with it" (quoted in Wilmot, 1976).

However, professors do not hold all the power (Raven and French, 1956; Hocker and Wilmot, 1985), since students have value in the educational system as people and as consumers of the service provided by their teachers. If professors had no students, or hostile, inattentive students, they could not do their work effectively.

Power currencies are areas upon which you may draw to persuade the other party to deal effectively with you in a conflict situation. The concept of currencies depends on the idea that power is a product of the *relationship*, not the individual person. "All power in interpersonal relations is a property of the social relationship rather than a quality of the individual outside of the relationship" (Hocker and Wilmot, 1985, p. 76). Emerson (1962) posited that person A has power over person B to the extent that B is dependent on A for goal attainment, and vice versa. To illustrate this point, think of a college student who is trying to enroll in a class listed as closed. To determine the professor's power over the student, we must know (1) the student's goal (to add the class) and (2) how dependent the student is on the professor in accomplishing the goal (completely). To decide the student's power to negotiate with the professor we must know (1) the professor's goals (have a full but not overloaded class and to appear reasonable) and (2) the professor's dependency on the student (slight). In this case the professor controls more of the resources, but the student does have some negotiating power based on the professor's goals. The student's best argument would center around a flexible definition of "a full class" and an appeal to fairness.

Currencies frequently drawn upon in conflicts include: expertise; control of resources such as attention, time and knowledge; linkages to other people in the system, such as other professors or the business community; personal qualities of attractiveness, warmth, conversational skills, or status; and intimacy or caring (Hocker and Wilmot, 1985). Students usually underestimate their power with professors, unaware of the value of persistence in asking for clarification without attacking.

For productive conflict management to occur, power must be at least temporarily balanced. Professors can voluntarily limit their power by avoiding the use of threats and structuring ways for students to influence the teaching process. Occasionally, they can use the services of a third party such as a chair or dean when the student cannot speak for him/herself effectively. Teachers, usually in the high-powered position, can take charge of the collaborative process for the good of all parties.

In the thesis meeting scenario, the professor could have said something like this when the student asked, "What do you want me to do?"

Professor: I want you and the committee to end up with a project that can be published and that we can all be proud of, especially you. I see some problems with getting there the way the design is now structured. I think what you want is [gives specific suggestions]. If you'll drop by an outline of rewrites, I'll give you some initial reaction about whether it solves the problem.

Conflict Tactics

How to drive your students crazy. Conflict tactics are the specific choices people make in managing their conflicts. Certain tactics continue to give teachers the high-powered advantage and underline the dependent position of students. Tactics guaranteed to drive a particular conflict underground instead of dealing with it openly would be teacher comments such as, "That's just the way life is," "Too bad," "Let me tell you what you should do," "This is a bad class," and other insensitive assertions. Students report a high level of frustration when the teacher interrupts them constantly in class, forgets commitments, gives vague answers, ignores requests, answers only part of a question, answers in an overly abstract manner, makes hostile jokes, gives ambivalent answers, or avoids a student altogether. These *avoidance* tactics (Hocker and Wilmot, 1985; Sillars and others, 1982), help to keep the power structure unbalanced.

Instead of avoiding the conflict, teachers can engage in a conflict, either in competitive or collaborative ways. Students receive little help from teachers who find fault with what they have done, make hostile jokes at the students' expense, mind-read, or issue threats. These tactics can be classified as *competitive* tactics. A list of *collaborative* tactics follows, along with examples of their use in teacher-student conflicts:

1. *Description.* "I noticed that your grades have declined for the past three quarters," *not* "You must not have been working."

2. *Disclosure.* "You don't have any way to know this, but past experience leads me to conclude that students have trouble finishing incompletes. So I am fairly prejudiced against the practice," *not* "You'll never finish it."

3. *Negative inquiry* (soliciting complaints about self). "You said you were disappointed with the class. What makes you say that? I'd like to know," *not* "You should have read the syllabus more carefully."

4. *Emphasizing common interests.* "I know both of us are interested in your doing well in the course. How are you studying for the exams?" *not* "I can't help you if you don't study."

Collaboration as a strategy of conflict management builds on constructive conflict management tactics. Personalities do not need changing—the communication people choose to use needs changing.

Collaborative Goals

For collaborators, conflict presents the opportunity for the student and professor to learn from the process of negotiating content and relationship; the process is the product. When teachers treat every conflict over a grade the same way, they communicate a high-powered, non-caring form of conflict management. *If collaboration guides the conflict management process, new participants make this situation a new conflict.* An appropriate way to approach the conflict would be to ask, "What would be the best course of action at this time, with this student, given the constraints of the situation, and given my feelings and opinions?"

Principled negotiation. Fisher and Ury's popular book, *Getting To Yes* (1981), describes steps for conflict management that emphasize the process rather than the outcome of the conflict situation. Teachers can learn the four principles of this approach and apply them to teacher-student conflicts. Conflicts handled in this manner are likely to be characterized by the concerns discussed so far—humanism, process, relationship goals, and shared power. They can be remembered by the words *People, Interests, Options,* and *Criteria.*

A teacher in a large university discovered that one of his carefully constructed multiple-choice tests had made its way to the files of various student groups. At first, he was enraged and devised a plan to drop the test review, make up a new test, and grade on a rigorous curve. Then he thought about just forgetting the "leak" and going on with the test. His conflict was not with an individual student, since he did not know who was responsible for the stolen test, but with an amorphous group of students who did not know he was aware of the theft. Using Fisher and Ury's four steps, the professor worked his way through the problem:

1. *Separate people from the problem.* Giving the same test would be unfair to the students not having access to the files. Not all the students created the problem, so an unfair solution would penalize every student.

2. *Focus on interests, not positions.* Rather than making position statements or non-negotiable demands, interest bargaining encourages development of overlapping concerns. The teacher's interest in this conflict involved having students learn the material, refusing to reward students who stole the test, refusing to punish students who did not steal the test, and avoiding a time-consuming task of completely remaking the test. The students' interest involved fair testing and grading and a test review. Usually, interests can be made to overlap, and the solution can be drawn from the area of overlap.

3. *Generate a variety of options.* Often, the first choice that pops into one's mind is one that reflects anger, hostility, defeat, revenge, or fuzzy thinking. In the case of the purloined exam, a first choice might be,

"Give an essay exam" (too hard to grade), "Let it go" (unfair option), or "Make up a rigorous new test" (time-consuming). The more options that can be generated by all parties, the better. In this case, the professor asked the undergraduate board of students to help him come up with options that met shared criteria.

4. *Develop criteria for judging solutions.* Insist that the result be based on some objective standard of judgment. In this case, the criteria might include the professor's time, fairness to the non-thieving students, professional standards, moral standards, equal treatment, or precedent. Many other possible criteria exist for different conflicts. Choose the criteria for judgment *before* choosing the particular solution.

With the help of undergraduates not in his class, the professor revised the order of test questions so that a pre-marked answer sheet could not be used, changed some but not all of the questions, and added more questions on lecture material. He was satisfied that the solution met the criteria set earlier. People, Interests, Options, and Criteria can be applied to any conflict in which parties wish to collaborate for a high-quality solution.

Patterns of Conflict Interaction

By this time, you may have identified predictable patterns of conflict between you and your students. You might want to list kinds of recurring events. If your students consistently turn in late work, you might try to identify the communication structure you use. Do you communicate threats? Do you fail to give a clear description of expectations? Do you give answers that students would label "ambiguous"? Do you expect the students to do projects they are not trained to do? Before assuming that you have irresponsible students or that you are doing something wrong, analyze the communication you use. Recurring events give clues about the nature of ongoing conflicts.

Fractionating Conflicts

Fractionating conflicts refers to the process of sizing a dispute appropriately or breaking it down from one large mass to several smaller, more manageable conflicts. For example, if angry students ask you to explain you grading policy, ask "What do you want to hear about specifically?" This response sizes the dispute downward, rather than setting up a potentially defensive situation in which the professor explains grading philosophy in general. The following phrases help with fractionation (Hocker and Wilmot, 1985): "What part of that problem is most important to you right now?" "Who are the people most immediately involved?" "I want to hear more about your objections. Please start with the most important."

Use of Third Party

Sometimes, in spite of the best efforts of teacher and student, the conflict remains at an impasse and the services of a third party must be sought. The chair of the department, dean, or student complaint board should be used only when two-party negotiations have failed—never as an avoidance device. The same kinds of skills discussed previously lead to successful third-party negotiations. (See Hocker and Wilmot, 1985, for a detailed treatment of third-party intervention.)

Conclusion

Effective conflict management begins with a change in one's way of dealing with conflict, including understanding its nature, styles developed over time, power in conflicts, collaborative goals, and fractionation. Productive conflict management inside and outside the classroom provides the opportunity to model the process of working *with* instead of *against* others. The use of power presents a paradoxical situation. To be effective people, we need to take advantage of opportunities and use resources. Yet, within an ongoing relationship, maximization of individual power is counterproductive for all parties. Learning to pursue peaceful relations with opposing parties may be the central issue of our times, and the classroom could be the ideal training ground for honing these skills.

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In learning as in loving, without regenerative reciprocity we have only gestures—motions with no meaning.

The Art of Teaching: An Act of Love

Joel M. Jones

In a review of a collection of essays on university teaching, Leslie Fiedler declared that "the encounter of teacher and student is basically an erotic encounter, at best a passionate coming together of strangers, at worst a failed love affair, they confess, lacking the appropriate vocabulary" (1972, p. 65). The time has come to build that vocabulary. When so many in academia applaud a resurgent rationalism, when we read of new converts to the counter-reformation, when the terms "intuitive" and "imaginative," "sensitive," and "subjective" once again take on pejorative connotations, when so many of us (faculty and administrators alike) seem to accept an assumed student passivity, then we need to risk ridicule and parody by developing the vocabulary which will allow us to compare the art of teaching and the act of loving. Both are highly personal communicative arts, which lately have been discussed too often merely in terms of technique. We can move toward the new vocabulary by turning for implicit inspiration to works such as Harold Taylor's *Students Without Teachers* (1969), Kenneth Eble's *A Perfect Education* (1966), Maxine Greene's *Landscapes of Learning* (1978), or Stanford Ericksen's *The Essence of Good Teaching* (1984). For explicit and concrete references, we must turn both to the scattered testimonial statements concerning the erotic nature of teaching-learning and to our own personal classroom experiences.

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