Teacher-Student Confrontations

Joyce L. Hocker

College teachers have always experienced conflicts with their students, both inside and outside of class, and yet they have to accept the fact that sometimes the conflicts are inevitable. They are a part of the educational process and must be resolved. The resolution of these conflicts is vital to the success of the course and the teacher's position as a guide in the learning process.

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. The teacher responds with a critique, and the student defends his position. This exchange is typical of the conflict that often occurs in the classroom. The teacher must be able to handle these conflicts in a way that is both fair and effective.

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.

Jean M. Cooke is associate professor of Speech Communication at the University of New Mexico. In addition to her teaching and research on the interpersonal dynamics of classroom instruction, she is director of the university's Teaching Assistant Resource Center.
The problem of the chapter is to present preschool lessons that in-clude conflict management. The reduction of the impact of the person's predictable and impor-
tant. That's why we're looking for a more realistic and well-informed model of the conflict and understanding the model of the conflict. In order to understand the model of the conflict, it's important to look at the conflict itself and the way it's presented. The conflict itself can be seen as a process of collaboration rather than competition, and it's important to understand the way it's presented. This process involves understanding the conflict itself, and the way it's presented.

The standard and traditional model of conflict is based on the assumption that conflict is a zero-sum game, where one side wins and the other side loses. This approach is limited because it doesn't take into account the complexity of conflict and the ways in which it can be managed. A more realistic and well-informed model of conflict is needed to understand the way it's presented, and to develop strategies for managing it effectively.

There are several approaches to conflict management, and each has its own strengths and weaknesses. It's important to understand the nature of conflict and the ways in which it can be managed, in order to develop effective strategies for dealing with it. The key to managing conflict is to understand the ways in which it's presented, and to develop strategies for managing it effectively.

In conclusion, conflict is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon, and it's important to understand the ways in which it can be managed in order to develop effective strategies for dealing with it. The key to managing conflict is to understand the ways in which it's presented, and to develop strategies for managing it effectively.
If one had as models professionals who were imperious and demanding, the immediate problem was to transform the personal relationship in the conflict and to enhance the interdependence of the conflict situation. If the problem is solved, but the relationship worsened, the conflict situation is not yet solved. Following is a sample of dialogue that might transform the previous case into one that will end productively.

Student: [After formality] I thought I understood what to do on the paper, I followed the assignment.

Teacher: [Does so] Tell me what you understand of the paper assignment.

Student: [Says 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. The student's goals, immediately and by overtly agreeing that a problem exists, even if the problem definition is not clear.

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Student: [Says the confusion came from] In all conflicts, the parties must have enough power to solve their problem and enough self-esteem to communicate effectively. The problems of powerlessness and low esteem are core issues in every conflict.

High Assertiveness

Low Assertiveness

High Cooperation

Low Cooperation

Accommodation

Avoiding

Figure 1: Conflict Styles

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:

Professor: If you don't know what your topic is, then I'll see if that's okay.

Student: What do you mean?

Professor: If you don't know that by now, I don't know why you 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 situation, which were learned as reasonable (if not desirable) for that situation. Rather, they are learned as biased parts of an individual's personality. 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.
when the student sought the professor's help. The professor could have said, "When you think you're doing something, you're actually doing something else." This made the students think about their own thinking processes and encouraged them to notice the differences between what they thought they were doing and what they were actually doing. The professor then led the discussion by asking questions about the students' thought processes, helping them to identify their mistakes, and suggesting ways to improve their thinking skills. The students learned to be more self-aware and to think critically about their own thought processes. The professor also emphasized the importance of practicing and refining one's thinking skills, and provided strategies for doing so. Overall, the professor helped the students develop a deeper understanding of their own thinking processes and how to improve them.
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 underlie 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, 1992), 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 believe that you 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,
Endnotes


References


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The Art of Teaching