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# STRATEGIES TO PREVENT AND REDUCE CONFLICT IN COLLEGE CLASSROOMS

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**Abstract.** Faculty members are often unprepared to effectively handle classroom conflict, which may be distressing and disruptive. A range of techniques are presented that faculty can use to help prevent the development of negative emotions and conflict in their classes. Recommendations include communicating warmth and sensitivity toward students by remaining enthusiastic and available, establishing a shared course framework by determining course objectives and seeking students' input, and helping students develop relationships in class through interactive teaching. These suggestions, and others, are discussed in detail.

Negative emotion and conflict are relatively common in college classrooms. Burroughs (1990) estimated that approximately 20 percent of students display active resistance to learning. Overt student behaviors are a common source of classroom conflict and include actions that many faculty members find immature or irritating, such as students talking during lectures, eating and drinking noisily, or arguing with the instructor. Covert stu-

dent behaviors also precipitate conflict, but these actions appear more passive or inattentive, such as students sleeping during class, missing classes, acting bored or apathetic, and leaving class early (Appleby 1990; Kearney and Plax 1992). Furthermore, disruptive behavior and conflict can spread and ultimately include numerous students. Such classrooms are characterized by a pervasive sense of negativity among students, overt hostility or disrespect expressed by many people in the course, class-wide resistance to completing assignments or participating in discussion, and the expression of contempt between students (Boice 1996).

Although faculty members report that they perceive classroom conflict to be distressing and disruptive, they are often reluctant to take active measures to resolve the disputes (Amada 1994). One likely reason why inexperienced and even seasoned instructors ignore conflict is that faculty are not effectively prepared to handle these situations. In this article, I will address this knowledge gap and present concrete strategies that faculty can use to prevent and diffuse conflicts in their classes.

## Preventing Classroom Conflict

Perhaps the most effective way to reduce or manage classroom conflict is to prevent it from initially occurring. Faculty can accomplish this objective by demonstrating sensitive interpersonal behavior, providing clear structure within their courses, and using teaching techniques that foster collaboration among students.

### *Conflict Prevention Strategy 1*

Communicate warmth and interpersonal sensitivity. Students are acutely aware of the social and emotional dimensions of teaching, such as instructors' enthusiasm, warmth, and respect for others; these factors affect students' motivation and are reflected in their appraisal of courses (Davis 1993). Effective instructors often display emotional and physical "immediacy" when teaching (Kearney and Plax 1992). These faculty members

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engage their students through eye contact, open body posture, respectful listening, smiling, and expressions of interest. Faculty immediacy is critical to reducing disruptiveness because it increases students' affinity toward the instructor and subject matter, and enhances students' motivation (McCroskey and Richmond 1992).

Faculty who establish a positive classroom climate and prevent conflicts often communicate enthusiasm, set their pace to match students' level of understanding, and remain available after class and during office hours, as well as listen to and encourage students. Conversely, other faculty alienate students through disparaging remarks, lectures characterized by inappropriately rapid pace or perplexing content, and their own frequent late arrivals (Boice 1996). This lack of warmth and sensitivity often increases students' anxiety and confusion and can eventually set the stage for classroom conflict.

The following vignette demonstrates one faculty member's expression of care and involvement:

Dr. A often teaches courses in advanced statistics. Even though students regard the subject matter as exceptionally difficult and dry, Dr. A's students become highly invested in the class because of her demeanor. Dr. A encourages her students during each class session and expresses confidence in her their ability to learn the material. She emphasizes that course content is indeed difficult to understand at first, but assures her students that they will learn through practice and dedication. She expresses her commitment to her students by meeting with them outside of class when they need additional assistance and by developing individually tailored problem sets for them to complete so that she can provide them with frequent constructive feedback. Dr. A always seems enthusiastic in class; her attitude is in fact contagious.

### *Conflict Prevention Strategy 2*

Establish a shared course framework. A shared set of goals and a common course agenda are important determinants of students' reaction to the class and their motivation to learn. A mutually established framework minimizes classroom conflict for several reasons. First, students develop a clearer sense of the

instructor's expectations and the course objectives; this clarity and predictability counteracts potential feelings of helplessness and confusion that often precipitate classroom disruption (Boice 1996). Second, student input into the formulation of the class agenda maximizes the chance that they will perceive the material as relevant and important. Finally, students are likely to view instructors who request student input as caring and responsive.

The initial step in developing a shared course framework is for instructors to think about their goals for a particular class. Well-defined goals not only address mastering course content but also describe the specific skills that students should be able to demonstrate at the end of the course. Thus, clearly stated student learning objectives typically express student competencies in measurable terms and focus on higher-order thinking skills, such as analysis, synthesis, or evaluation (Nilson 1998).

Instructors then can seek students' input after crystallizing their conception of goals for the course. More specifically, students should have the opportunity to think about those skills that they would like to develop during the class. Gathering this information allows professors to build bridges within the course so that students perceive the material as salient and relevant. The process of assessing students' educational needs should continue throughout the semester. For instance, instructors can ask students questions such as, "What do you know about this topic?" and "What more would you like to learn about this subject?" at the beginning of class meetings. Similarly, faculty can assign "minute papers" at the end of class sessions (McKeachie 1999). This adaptable active learning strategy involves asking students to write briefly about what they learned from the lecture, found interesting, or felt was personally relevant. Finally, faculty can conduct midsemester course evaluations in which students provide feedback about the course and their learning experience.

Although Professor B had not experienced disputes or complaints from students in his human biology class, he felt that they seemed less interested compared with students whom he had taught during previous semesters. Rather than ignore this situation, Professor B decided to seek

input from his class during the fifth week of the semester. He asked his students to write down three positive aspects of the course and three suggestions for improvement. His students indicated that they enjoyed the structure of his lectures, the examples that he provided, and the extra credit opportunities. However, many of Professor B's students also wrote that they felt overwhelmed by the amount of material that they had to master for the exam and criticized the clarity of the textbook. Professor B summarized this feedback for his students the following week. He offered to prepare a study guide for the exams and conduct an optional study session before each test.

### *Conflict Prevention Strategy 3*

Establish learning communities in classes. Faculty also can prevent conflict in their classrooms by building a sense of community among students. Promoting student cohesion often starts on the first day of class through informal methods, such as student introductions and ice-breaker activities. Students can introduce themselves to the class as a whole or to a smaller number of peers in courses with larger enrollments.

Ms. C, a teaching assistant who leads a section of intermediate Spanish, wants her students to feel comfortable in her course. She realizes that her students are more willing to practice their conversation skills when they know each other. This sense of community encourages them to take risks and practice speaking although they may be uncertain of their abilities. Ms. C also reports that when students feel comfortable with each other, she has fewer problems associated with students' attendance and unwillingness to participate. On the first day of class, Ms. C begins the process of community-building by providing each student with a list of descriptive statements written in Spanish (e.g., "comes from a large family," "is a vegetarian," "listens to classical music"). Her students must then introduce themselves to one another and find someone in the class who can endorse each statement.

Faculty can continue to prevent conflict during the semester and foster community by frequently using peer learning techniques when they teach content mate-

rial. In cooperative learning, students interact in small groups wherein their goals and rewards are interdependent (Johnson, Johnson, and Smith 1991). In addition to enhanced academic performance, a meta-analysis of more than 375 published studies indicated that student participation in cooperative learning is associated with increased amounts of interpersonal caring, liking, commitment, and support among students (Johnson, Johnson, and Smith 1991).

There are many different peer learning strategies that increase student cohesion and decrease classroom conflict. Some of these techniques are informal and faculty can easily integrate them into their lectures. For instance, instructors can use the think-pair-share technique, in which they pose a question to the class, tell students to review their responses with a partner, and then ask students to share their responses with the class as a whole. Other peer learning techniques require more time and effort. For example, faculty can develop debates in which teams of students explore controversial issues from multiple perspectives. Alternatively, instructors can use problem-based learning in which groups of students analyze case material, consult resources, and apply course content to answer a series of questions (McKeachie 1999).

In every class session, Dr. D's students spend a significant amount of time working with peers. At the beginning of each of his marital and family therapy courses, Dr. D poses an intriguing question on the overhead projector (e.g., "what is the difference between corporal punishment and child abuse?"). Students write down their answers individually and then discuss their responses with a partner. Dr. D also places students in long-standing collaborative learning groups in which they develop a fictitious family, members of whom are experiencing psychological problems. Throughout the course, students apply what they learn from lectures and reading material to develop a psychological evaluation strategy and an intervention plan. Each group then role-plays a sample therapy session for the class. Dr. D finds that this teaching approach facilitates connections among students, increases their investment in the course, and enhances the overall tone of the class.

## Reducing Negative Emotion and Classroom Conflict

Cultivating a positive classroom climate often prevents student apathy, hostility, and conflict. However, there are times when faculty must directly engage with students' negative emotions to contain conflict after it has occurred. This process is not only necessary to ensure successful classroom management but can ultimately provide an opportunity for students' growth and development.

### *Conflict Reduction Strategy 1*

The initial step in restricting the potentially deleterious impact of student disruptiveness and conflict is for the instructor to acknowledge explicitly students' feelings and communicate empathy. Psychologists call this process "reflection"; it involves repeating another person's statements with an emphasis on their emotions. Hill and O'Brien (1999) recommended the following basic format so that listeners identify the speakers' feeling and its rationale: "You feel \_\_\_\_\_ because \_\_\_\_\_."

Professor E responds with empathy to a student who is plaintive about a low grade on a test by stating: "It seems like you're very disappointed and upset about your grade, especially because you studied for several hours and felt well-prepared beforehand. It also sounds like you feel that I'm being insensitive and not understanding the points that you made in this essay." Professor E's acknowledgment surprises the student; validating the student's emotional responses reduces the intensity of the conflict because he feels understood by the professor.

Although reflecting students' feelings seems to be a simple process on the surface, there are many subtleties that influence whether students will actually perceive the instructor as empathic. First, faculty members should be aware of their nonverbal communication during these times. Instructors should display an open body posture, maintain eye contact, and appear attentive and comfortable. A compassionate statement will seem insensitive if an instructor simultaneously looks at her watch or clenches his jaw. Second, professors can use brief, encouraging remarks to allow their stu-

dents to express fully their thoughts and feelings. Statements such as "I see" or "Tell me more about this" express interest and allow instructors to gain greater awareness about students' classroom problems. Third, professors should listen intently at these times to absorb students' mood; they should concentrate on the text and the subtext of students' statements. Although reflections can be brief (e.g., "You're really upset about this"), they convey greater empathy when the statements are detailed, communicate an understanding of students' feelings and their situations, and avoid simple repetition.

### *Conflict Reduction Strategy 2*

Help students evaluate their alternatives. Reflecting negative emotions is often a sufficient response when students primarily want to feel understood or are only moderately distressed. Successful conflict management often requires additional work, which varies depending on the type of problem at hand. In student-owned problems, the conflict predominantly interferes with the student's situation and blocks his or her own goals (Kearney and Plax 1992). Faculty can empower students by helping them look for alternatives and evaluate the consequences for each possible solution (Popkin 1993).

During Dr. F's office hours, Shelley complained that members of her collaborative learning group were not contributing equitably to a course project. Dr. F helps the student evaluate her alternatives by first empathically stating: "Shelley, you seem really frustrated and angry at other members of your collaborative learning group because they're not putting in as much effort as you. It also sounds like you feel helpless because they have been unwilling to work harder even though you talked with them about the situation." Dr. F then encourages Shelley to examine different alternatives by asking questions including, "What can you do about that?" "What else can you try?" or "What do you think would happen if you did that?" Shelley decides to confront her peers again, but now chooses to propose a more concrete plan for dividing up the project work. She also asks Dr. F to help arbitrate the situation if



her plan is unsuccessful. When Dr. F followed up a week later and asked Shelley how the solution worked out, he was happy to learn that Shelley's assertiveness with her peers had effectively reduced conflict within her group.

### *Conflict Reduction Strategy 3*

Use comprehensive problem-solving methods. In contrast to student-owned problems, faculty-owned classroom conflicts involve the instructor in a more direct and inextricable way. Faculty-owned problems often require comprehensive management techniques that integrate and extend the strategies described above (e.g., Bodine and Crawford 1998; Holton 1998; Kuhlenschmidt and Layne 1999; Tiberius and Flak 1999). This approach typically involves three phases: setting the stage for effective conflict resolution, clearly defining the problem, and developing mutually acceptable solutions.

Problem solving is most effective when faculty members detect conflict at an early point and promptly initiate dialogue with students. Because problem-solving discussions are often lengthy and may be personal in nature, instructors should carefully choose an appropriate time and location to meet with students.

Jason is a student in Professor G's sociology seminar focusing on race, class, and gender. Professor G has been very annoyed and distracted by Jason because he frequently talks to students sitting next to him using a relatively loud voice. She views his behavior as disrespectful and believes that he does not want to be in the class. She has attempted to curb his talkativeness by relatively benign methods (e.g., asking the class if there are any questions and standing closer to Jason while she lectures), but Professor G feels that the problem is actually getting worse. She decides to address this conflict directly and discretely asks Jason to speak with her immediately following class.

The second phase of conflict management involves clearly defining the problem. Instructors should define problematic behavior in concrete and objective terms. They should also be able to pinpoint when the conflict occurs as well as its antecedents and consequences. Students are most likely to be committed to the

problem-solving process if faculty members demonstrate empathy, tact, and concern when broaching issues of contention.

Professor G initiates a conversation with Jason by stating: "Jason, I'm concerned about whether you're enjoying class. Over the past two weeks, I've noticed that you frequently talk to people who sit near you when I lecture. Although I understand that students' attention will wander at times, I'm worried that other people find your conversations distracting. I also feel that it is more difficult for me to explain concepts clearly and remain focused when students talk during class lectures. I want to make sure that the class is a positive learning experience for you and for all students, so it is important that we talk about this."

Students play an important role in defining the problem during the conflict resolution process. Students often have different interpretations of the facts and are in the position to provide otherwise inaccessible information about their thoughts, expectations, motivations, and feelings (Tiberius and Flak 1999). Rather than "informing students about their problem," skillful instructors ask students about their perception of the problem. These faculty members then verify their understanding of students' perspective by periodically paraphrasing students' view of the situation and reflecting their feelings. In general, an accurate definition of the problem is the product of a collaborative dialogue rather than an instructor's monologue.

Although Jason did not dispute that he talks during Professor G's lectures, he did not view his behavior as rude or inappropriate. Jason responds, "I often don't agree with what you're saying in class and I've just got to let someone know. I also think that you blame all the problems of the world on white guys, like me. That's not fair or right."

Instructors should be aware of their own heightened emotions when discussing classroom conflicts with students. For example, faculty may be angered by the student's behavior, anxious about confronting the student, or defensive in response to the student's complaints and accusations. Instructors should monitor their emotional reactions to ensure that they can constructively

define and remedy the problem (Kuhlenschmidt and Layne 1999).

After clearly identifying their needs and interests, faculty and students then propose as many different ideas as possible for resolving the problem. Instructors and students should initially refrain from critiquing these suggestions during brainstorming. Rather, they should evaluate options only after many possibilities have been generated. Effective solutions often involve modifying and combining several suggestions. Faculty members should monitor the effectiveness of the solutions and revisit the situation at a later point in time if it is necessary.

Professor G and Jason generated a list of ideas potentially to resolve this conflict. Some were unlikely to work because they were too simplistic, one-sided, or inflammatory (e.g., "Jason will remain quiet during lectures," "Professor G will stop criticizing white men."). Other solutions, however, were more viable (e.g., "Jason and other students will be able to express their thoughts and opinions during discussion times scheduled for the last fifteen minutes of each class"; "Students will have the chance to present counterarguments that are supported by theory and research in a term paper that can be selected as an alternative to one exam"; "Jason will refrain from talking during class lectures and instead is invited to explain his positions at greater length during Professor G's office hours"; and "Professor G will present arguments and counterarguments during her lectures so that multiple sides of an issue can be explored in greater detail"). These latter solutions have a greater chance of resolving the conflict because they appeal to the needs and interests of both Jason and Professor G (i.e., a respectful classroom environment and the opportunity to share reactions to course material in constructive ways).

### **Summary and Conclusion**

Regardless of their academic discipline or amount of teaching experience, many faculty members encounter conflict in the classes that they teach. In the worst cases, frequent or intense encounters with unruly or uninvolved students result in faculty disillusionment or even dread of teaching (Boice 2000). In this article, I

presented a range of techniques that faculty can use to help prevent the development of negative emotions and conflict in their classes; I also detailed strategies for faculty to use after problems occur. My six main recommendations, which are based on existing research and publications describing best practices, include the following: (a) communicate warmth and sensitivity toward students by remaining enthusiastic and available; (b) establish a shared course framework by determining course objectives and seeking students' input often; (c) create learning communities by helping students develop relationships in class through interactive teaching techniques; (d) display empathy to students' negative emotions by using reflection statements; (e) help students evaluate alternatives to resolve student-owned problems; and (f) use comprehensive problem-solving tactics to address instructor-owned conflicts.

Successful conflict management may therefore be accomplished when instructors modify their interpersonal behavior, their attitudes toward students and the classroom experience, or their teaching style. Although this discussion emphasizes that faculty have a range of options that they can use to prevent or manage disruptions, I do not minimize students' responsibilities to create a positive classroom environment. In actuality, students and faculty both affect the tenor of the class. Rather, I underscore that instructors are in an influential position to change the social and emotional climate of the class.

This reflection and change process can increase the enjoyment and fulfillment that instructors derive from teaching.

*Key words: conflict, conflict resolution, classroom environment, student behavior, learning experience, teacher-student relationship*

## NOTES

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