

Managing Classroom Conflict

I've come to the frightening conclusion that I am the decisive element in the classroom. It's my personal approach that creates the climate. It's my daily mood that makes the weather. As a teacher, I possess tremendous power to make a child's life miserable or joyous. I can be a tool of torture or an instrument of inspiration. I can humiliate or humor, hurt or heal. In all situations, it is my response that decides whether a crisis will be escalated or de-escalated and a child humanized or de-humanized.

— Haim Ginott, 1976.

As teachers, we have enormous power in the classroom, but we must strive to use it to create a climate in which students are neither so intimidated that they never challenge us, nor become so infuriated that they revolt. The way we design our courses and interact with students regulates this power relationship and determines the outcome.

Instructors in courses that focus on controversial topics can anticipate discord and even plan to use it productively, but conflict can arise spontaneously in any course, at any time, over issues or situations that cannot be anticipated. Some conflicts derive from misunderstandings about coursework or the teacher's intentions and manifest themselves in behaviors that teachers find offensive or discourteous — coming to class late and leaving early, complaints about test questions or grades, sarcastic comments and disapproving groans during class, etc. (Boice, 1996). Other conflicts are social or ideological in origin and arise when students believe that the instructor (or the other students in the course) embrace beliefs that are contrary to their own, which may give rise to feelings of alienation, hostility, and anger. If the instructor is unprepared to handle these conflicts when they occur, the crisis can derail the course and poison the atmosphere to such an extent that effective learning is no longer possible.

The literature on classroom dynamics suggests that teachers can take steps to prevent these incidents from occurring (or reduce the chances that an incident will escalate into a crisis) and, by practicing effective interpersonal communication techniques, can handle “hot moments” effectively.

Prevention: Clarifying Expectations

One of the major sources of student dissatisfaction (and hence, conflict with teachers) is the perception by students that the teacher's expectations are unclear, unfair, or unstable. The way a teacher defines course expectations, describes them in the syllabus, and uses them in testing and grading strongly influences student attitudes toward the instructor. Chief complaints of students in this regard include (but are not limited to):

- Course grading schemes that are difficult to understand or appear to be arbitrary.
- Lack of clear grading criteria for course assignments.
- Lack of a policy for attendance, late assignments, make-up exams, etc.
- Lengthy course packs that seem only tangentially related to the course.

All of these issues can lead to conflicts between students and teachers, so it makes sense to examine one's syllabus and develop more explicit instructions, policies, and expectations. At the same time, one should try to avoid turning the syllabus into a list of rules and punishments. One way to present your expectations in a less adversarial framework is to place them under the general rubric “How to Succeed in This Course.” Phrasing your expectations as

helpful advice for success changes the tone and helps reinforce the impression that you are trying to help them learn and succeed.

Grades and grading policies are one of the richest areas for potential conflict in any course, at any level, so one should develop a course grading scheme that is fair, easy to understand, and accurately reflects differences in student learning (for guidelines on grading schemas, see FYC 10, *Grading Systems*). Similarly, grading of tests and papers should be fair, accurate, and consistent — and obviously so to the students (for guidelines, see FYC 7, *Writing and Grading Essay Questions*; FYC 8, *Improving Multiple Choice Questions*; FYC 9, *Evaluating Student Projects*; FYC 18, *Planning, Designing, and Evaluating Student Assignments*).

If you use course packs in your teaching, integrating the reading into the course is an important goal. For useful guidelines in developing course packs, refer to the essay FYC 19, *Developing Focused Course Packs*.

Prevention: Developing Social Cohesion

Most teachers are aware of the need to establish rapport with students and to create a “positive classroom climate” to facilitate learning, but this kind of relationship also plays a critical role in the prevention of spontaneous conflict in the classroom. Students who feel alienated from other members of the class and distant from the interests or attention of the teacher are more likely to exhibit aggressive or provocative behavior in class (Kearney & Plax, 1992). A sense of personal connection and rapport with the teacher is especially important, and studies of teaching evaluations have shown that the “caring” factor has a strong influence on the outcome — if students think the instructor cares about them, they will be more positively-disposed to the course and the instructor (Feldman, 1989).

To enhance social cohesion in the classroom, students need to become acquainted with each other and with the instructor. This process should begin on the first day of class with activities that facilitate introductions and promote a sense of community. The more students feel that they are members of the same group, the less likely they will be to violate the group’s social norms. The teacher must also reach out to students and reduce the “psychological distance” between instructor and student. How much the teacher chooses to tell them about him/herself is a matter of individual choice, but it is clear that the teacher’s identity as a human being — with attendant feelings and emotions — can be enhanced by revealing some personal information (e.g., taste in movies, hobbies, favorite vacation spots).

Learning students’ names as quickly as possible

— and using their names as you interact in class — demonstrates that you care about them as individuals. Every teacher has a different method for learning names, and technology has made this task somewhat easier, since it is possible to obtain pictures of most students with the online class roll system.

Frequent use of peer learning techniques facilitates personal interaction among students and thereby promotes cohesiveness (Meyers, 2003). These techniques range from simple pair/partner exercises to more elaborate group learning structures that can be incorporated into any course format. See Cuseo, 2002, and Millis & Cottell, 1998, for ways to use these techniques in the college classroom.

Establishing a formal social contract for classroom behavior also helps reduce the probability that conflicts will escalate beyond desirable levels. An example of these rules is included in the previous monograph, FYC 21, *Teaching Controversial Issues*.

Although many teachers use mid-course evaluations to assess student reactions to their teaching, it is good practice to solicit student feedback much earlier and more frequently. Staying in touch with students’ perceptions and feelings can alert the instructor to potential problems and enable him/her to address problems before they surface unexpectedly. Moreover, if students have more opportunities to express their concerns, they are less likely to nurse grudges and act out. Classroom Assessment Techniques (CATS), which range from simple “one-minute papers” to more elaborate written and oral exercises, are excellent tools for acquiring feedback (Angelo & Cross, 1993).

The instructor’s enthusiasm and personal warmth also help increase students’ affinity toward the teacher and promote a more mutually dependent classroom climate (Meyers, 2003). Although one cannot change one’s personality or fundamental communication style, one can try to communicate with students in ways that indicate interest and caring. Even simple techniques make a great difference in how students perceive your emotional and physical “immediacy,” for example maintaining eye contact, using an open body posture, listening carefully and respectfully, and using appropriate physical and verbal cues to signal interest (Kearney & Plax, 1992).

In summarizing his research on “classroom incivility,” Boice (2002) concludes

The most important point in this study is the one most often overlooked. Teachers were the most crucial initiators of classroom incivilities ... (however) teachers modeling a simple regimen of immediacies showed clear, reliable reductions in the CI levels of their classes and equally reliable increases in

a variety of student ratings of their teaching.
(p. 98)

Conflict Management

Conflict management requires the management of our own emotions as well as those of the students involved. As academics we often go to great lengths to avoid the discomfort of acknowledging strong emotions, sidestepping classroom situations that threaten to become too intense. Unfortunately, this tactic may only make matters worse, since a student who raises a “troublesome” issue is unlikely to let it drop, and may feel that it’s necessary to intensify their stance in order to get your attention. Indeed, the student may be driven to adopt ever more extreme positions if the issue is not addressed adequately when he/she raises it the first time.

Ignoring or dismissing a student’s comments can also sour the attitude of the entire class toward the teacher. If other students don’t agree with the student who raised the issue, they may be upset and uncomfortable if the teacher doesn’t deal with it forthrightly. On the other hand, if students have formed a cohesive group, they are likely to support a fellow student who they feel has been shown disrespect by the teacher.

Although every situation is different, there are strategies and tactics that can enable you to de-escalate the conflict and yield a satisfactory outcome. The process, described below, can be remembered by the acronym “SOAR-UP.”

Stop the activity and count to “10” before speaking or reacting. Stopping the action breaks the cycle of stimulus-response and provides time for everyone’s emotions to cool down, including your own. A pause also provides time to reflect on the causes and possible solutions to the problem.

Did the event engage any “hot buttons” for you? Shock, embarrassment, self-doubt, and feeling threatened are all common emotions in these situations. Also, fear of public scandal, making an error, loss of control, or mishandling the incident may prey on one’s mind. The more you are aware of your emotions, the better you can control them and prevent them from driving your response.

Think of outcomes. What do you personally want to achieve in this situation? What do you want the student(s) to learn? If the situation occurred in class, what learning opportunities might be appropriate for the whole class? If the conflict arises from course expectations, assignments, deadlines, etc., what kinds of accommodations could you make to address the problem?

Classroom conflicts can present opportunities to

push the class to a higher level of understanding, enable the instructor to gain valuable insights into classroom dynamics, and improve the way the course is designed and taught.

Assess the situation. What do you think is the underlying cause? Is the heart of the issue a misunderstanding of course content/expectations/process, or have conflicts over personal beliefs, values, and attitudes provided the stimulus? Understanding the root cause will enable you to handle the situation effectively and help prevent the conflict from reoccurring.

Could you have done something — deliberately or inadvertently — that contributed to the conflict? Review exactly what the student(s) said and the tone in which it was said. Consider the possibility that student(s) might have created the conflict deliberately, to serve an outside agenda.

React to the student(s) comments. First, try to visualize the issue as a “third person” in the room (and help your students do so as well). This tactic will help separate the issue from the emotions involved. Focusing on the structure of the argument, underlying assumptions, factual errors, and the use of logic can help keep the discourse on a rational plane.

Be willing to change your position (as you would expect your students to do) when it appears that another position or interpretation is a valid one. Help students look for alternatives to their original positions (they may feel that they will lose face if they abandon a position that they fought so hard to defend). Be willing to agree to disagree; it is always possible for two rational people to disagree. Determine the appropriate venue for follow-up with the student(s). If one or two students are involved, your office may be the best place to continue the discussion and reach a mutually satisfactory solution.

Use active listening techniques and attend to body language. Verbally confirm that what you heard accurately matches what the student(s) said. Use encouraging remarks to elicit feelings and try to use language that communicates empathy: “You sound angry.” “You seem to be upset about this issue—why is that?” “You feel ____ because ____.” “Tell me more about your viewpoint.” If you have accurately identified the student(s) feelings, you can help separate the emotional content from the issue itself (the “third person” tactic described above).

Note the student(s) body language for evidence of anger, frustration, disengagement, or embarrassment. Attend to your own body language; it should convey your receptivity to what the student(s) has to say. An “open” posture will help: relax your body, keep your arms away

from your chest, stand with feet apart, and face the student squarely. Maintain a distance of at least four feet from the student, since closer proximity is threatening, especially if you are standing and the student is sitting. Maintain eye contact, and stay attentive to the student(s) and the rest of the class.

Prepare for the next time you teach this course. Reflect on what occurred and what you have learned from the experience. Could the situation have been avoided if you had done something differently at the beginning of the course? If so, make a plan to change the policies or teaching practices that contributed to the situation. Eliminate as many “gray areas” in your syllabus as possible: develop, communicate and employ a rationale for why you do what you do. Provide tools such as grading rubrics to help students understand the practices you follow. Develop guidelines for class discussion.

A Note About Academic Values

The values of the Academy are based on the tradition of liberal learning, humanism, and a commitment to the search for knowledge regardless of its consequences. Therefore, critical thinking and the development of open-mindedness are viewed as important learning goals in higher education. Most faculty members also subscribe to the values of equality, diversity, and cultural pluralism and favor social and political movements that promote these values. Not all students share these traditions and values, nor do they necessarily understand the bases for our beliefs, therefore we can expect to be challenged from time to time.

As adults engaged in scholarly professions, our intellectual and ethical systems are fully elaborated, but our students are usually just beginning to construct their own. When a student makes a statement that challenges a teacher’s world view, the instructor must try to handle it as an attempt to test a position or an argument rather than an attack on all that the teacher holds dear. The appropriate way to handle such a situation is to use it as an opportunity to help the student think through the evidence and the structure of the argument. The worst possible response is to attack the student for holding beliefs different from one’s own and thereby

lose the opportunity to teach the process of critical thinking through rational debate.

Resources

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