

# Conflict in the Classroom

Monday, April 18, 2016

Andre Audette & Justus Ghormley





## Natural Conflict Tendencies

	Engaged	Withdrawn	Calm	Hurt/Angry	Anxious	In Charge	Annoyed	Ambivalent
Addressing/correcting a student's misunderstanding								
Mild difference of opinion among students								
Disagreement about topic unfamiliar to you								
Spontaneous sharp disagreement								
Planned discussion about a controversial issue								
Unplanned discussion about a controversial issue								
Student unintentionally speaking/acting in insensitive ways								
Student intentionally showing rudeness/disrespect								
Student challenging you directly								
Student threatening you or another student								

## Natural Conflict Tendencies (continued)

*Source: United States Institute of Peace ([buildingpeace.org/conflict-styles](http://buildingpeace.org/conflict-styles))*

**Competer:** Competers are known for being persuasive and direct. They know the result they want in a conflict situation, and they go for it. Their strengths are that they are often passionate about their views and dedicated to pursuing their convictions. Competers are good at making quick decisions, and tend not to waste time, which is especially helpful in the time of crisis.

*Weaknesses:* Sometimes Competers wind up with unequal relationships with others, and feelings of others can be hurt or overlooked with their decision-making style.

**Problem Solver:** Problem Solvers tend to want to discuss all the details of a problem and work through it together so that everyone gets what he or she wants and is happy in the end. Their strengths are that they tend to welcome differences, build high-levels of trust and mutual understanding in relationships. There is also the potential to learn from creative problem solving.

*Weaknesses:* When time is a factor, it is difficult to spend the energy and time needed to process the way Problem Solvers tend to do. There is also the potential for burnout from over-processing.

**Compromiser:** Compromisers approach conflict with the goal of compromise. They tend to think about what they are willing to give up and what they are willing to hold on to, and try to gear communication to focus on this give and take for all parties. It is a good way to promote cooperation. It can be done fairly quickly when both parties are engaged.

*Weaknesses:* Sometimes neither party really winds up with what he/she wants. It can also be viewed as a BandAid approach that doesn't really get to the root of a conflict.

**Avoider:** Avoiders tend to step away from conflict. They often keep their opinions to themselves in conflict situations so as not to continue or escalate the conflict. They are often admired for having a calming, quiet presence in the face of crisis.

*Weaknesses:* Avoiders sometimes keep their feelings bottled up and then aren't able to meet their own needs. This can result in a frustrating buildup of emotions.

**Accommodator:** Accommodators have a harmonizing approach to conflict. They often focus on supporting others in a conflict situation and are adept at placating people in uncomfortable situations. Accommodators often gain strong appreciation from others involved in a conflict.

*Weaknesses:* Accommodators may build up resentment from denying their own needs. It also may be difficult for those who want to get to the root of the problem to work with Accommodators who tend to focus on making others happy.

## Sample Syllabus Statements

### **Example 1**

The goal of discussion is to understand and learn from the viewpoints and experiences of others in order to better understand our own opinions and the functioning of the world around us. Specifically, our goal in this course is to consider various components of and to think critically about American democracy. Just as multiple voices are necessary for a healthy democracy, your participation is important for the learning experiences of your fellow classmates and your instructor. ... To create an environment where everyone has the opportunity to participate, respect for individual differences and viewpoints will be maintained at all times. In sum, you are allowed and encouraged to disagree with other students, the professor, or the texts, but disagreement should always be expressed in a respectful manner inside and outside of the classroom.

### **Example 2**

In order to learn, we must be open to the views of people different from ourselves. Each and every voice in the classroom is important and brings with it a wealth of experiences, values and beliefs. In this time we share together over the semester, please honor the uniqueness of your fellow classmates, and appreciate the opportunity we have to learn from each other. Please respect your fellow students' opinions and refrain from personal attacks or demeaning comments of any kind.

### **Example 3**

The university recognizes that our individual differences can deepen our understanding of one another and the world around us, rather than divide us. In this class, people of all ethnicities, genders and gender identities, religions, ages, sexual orientations, disabilities, socioeconomic backgrounds, regions, and nationalities are strongly encouraged to share their rich array of perspectives and experiences. If you feel your differences may in some way isolate you from the university's community or if you have a need of any specific accommodations, please speak with the instructor early in the semester about your concerns and what we can do together to help you become an active and engaged member of our class and community.

### **Example 4**

I consider it part of my responsibility as instructor to address the learning needs of all of the students in this course. I will present materials that are respectful of diversity, as I believe that the diversity of student experiences and perspectives is essential to the deepening of knowledge in a course. Any suggestions that you have about other ways to include the value of diversity in this course are welcome.

## Conflict in the Classroom Case Studies

1. For weeks you have been suspicious that Li does not like you. He seems to sit in the back of the classroom and scowl at you. Your only interaction this month was when you told him to stop texting during class. One day you spend a few minutes reviewing how stellar parallax works and how astronomers use it to calculate the distance of nearby stars. Then, suddenly, Li cocks his head to one side, squints, and raises his hand. You call on him, and he asks, "What is stellar parallax?" When his classmates chuckle, Li turns red.
2. In the middle of a class discussion, your student Zariah mentions a new documentary, *The Hunting Ground*, which describes the culture of sexual assault on college campuses and the attempt of college administrations to cover it up. Zariah describes how several of her friends were assaulted at a party and how campus security seems to show sympathy to the male perpetrators. Samuel, whose father is a police officer, asked Zariah what he thought was a fair question: "How do they know your friends are telling the truth?" Zariah got upset and retorted, "This is not a joke." Samuel responded, "No, seriously, what were your friends wearing to the party?" Zariah and several others gasp and look to you to step in.
3. One morning in class you introduce your students to the story of Martin Karplus, a Nobel Prize winner in chemistry who immigrated to the United States from Germany. Upon learning that Karplus is an immigrant, a student speaks out sarcastically, "It's too bad Donald Trump wasn't elected sooner; he might have saved us from criminal minds like Karplus." Amidst some chuckling in the room, another student blurts out, "You're a freaking idiot! Trump is talking about illegals that broke the law and deserve to be deported." An awkward silence follows.
4. Over the weekend some of your students participate in a Black Lives Matter demonstration on campus. Some do not. The next Monday when you arrive for class, you see two of your students in a heated argument. The first one says in a loud voice, "I still don't see what's the problem with saying 'all lives matter.'" The second one replies, strongly, "If you can't see the difference between 'Black lives matter' and 'all lives matter,' then you are part of the problem!" The first one jabs back, "There you go again acting all self-righteous. It's people like you that give the racial equality movement a bad name. Get off your high horse!" Right as you set your stuff down, the two students get aggressive and start to push each other.

## **10 Tips for Addressing Sensitive Topics & Maintaining Civility**

*Adapted from The Center for Teaching and Faculty Development at San Francisco State University*

1. Create a classroom environment that from the first day sets ground rules for discussion and makes it clear that all students are included in the work of the class. Make sure you make all students feel connected to each other, the class, and the topic, and establish strong expectations about the content and manner of communication.
2. Recognize the diversity of opinions and backgrounds of your students. Learning takes place from exposure to a wide variety of views. Be open to all perspectives, and ask students to voice their points responsibly.
3. Add a statement to your policy sheet or syllabus. Explain any material or topic you plan to introduce that is sensitive or controversial, so that students are prepared for potential sensitivity issues. Explicitly state the classroom norms for communication and dialogue, and provide students with a specific understanding about how to frame their opinions.
4. Be prepared. Even if you do not think there will be a reaction to an issue you raise, plan ahead what you will do if you encounter one. Know yourself and your own emotional triggers. Don't personalize remarks.
5. Foster civility in the classroom. Focus the discussion on the topic, not the individual statement. Don't personalize the exchanges or the comments. Foster an environment of debate and dialogue in which it is ok to disagree.
6. Protect all students equally during moments of potential conflict. Seek to draw out understanding and communication as well as opinions. Ask them to step back, listen to other opinions, and analyze why they feel the way they do.
7. Ask students to take time out for reflection. Assign a writing exercise about the issue as a calming follow-up to discussion. Or assign a research paper or essay, in which students must argue for the position with which they disagree. You can also stage a debate in which you assign viewpoints, perhaps asking students to argue a position opposite their own.
8. Use your office hours. You may need to discuss issues outside of class, particularly if a student has been emotionally affected by pointed remarks or argued stances. Help them learn from the experience, and to voice their own opinions thoughtfully and civilly by engaging in out-of-the-class conversation.
9. Acknowledge hurtful or offensive remarks. When student comments and/or actions are potentially hurtful, immediate move the dialogue to less personal examinations of why words can hurt. Ignoring the situation will leave other students feeling unprotected and victimized, and give tacit permission for the behavior to continue. If you are unable to find a workable position, let students know that this is an important issue and that you will address it later.
10. Know your rights and responsibilities as an instructor. If a student suffers from an emotional reaction or angry outburst because of a sensitive topic discussion, acknowledge it, and ask them if they would like to remain or leave for a while. If you feel the situation is serious, inform the University Counseling Center and/or call their warm line or emergency line if needed (574-631-7336).

## Selected Readings on Conflict in the Classroom

### **BOOKS**

- Boice, Robert. 2006. *First-Order Principles for College Teachers: Ten Basic Ways to Improve the Teaching Process*. Bolton, MA: Anker.
- Buskist, William, & Victor A. Benassi (eds.). 2011. *Effective College and University Teaching: Strategies and Tactics for the New Professoriate*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Brookfield, Stephen D., & Stephen Preskill. 2005. *Discussion As a Way of Teaching: Tools and Techniques for Democratic Classrooms* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Campbell, William E., & Karl Aldrich Smith. 1997. *New Paradigms for College Teaching*. Edina, MN: Interaction Book Co.
- Dunn, Dana S., Regan A.R. Gurung, Karen Z. Naufel, & Janie H. Wilson (eds.). 2013. *Controversy in the Psychology Classroom: Using Hot Topics to Foster Critical Thinking*. Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Association.
- Lederach, John Paul. 2003. *The Little Book of Conflict Transformation*. New York, NY: Good Books.
- Nash, Robert J., DeMethra LaSha Bradley, & Arthur W. Chickering. 2008. *How to Talk About Hot Topics on Campus: From Polarization to Moral Conversation*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Patterson, Kerry, Joseph Grenny, Ron McMillan, & Al Switzler. 2011. *Crucial Conversations: Tools for Talking When Stakes are High* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). New York, NY: McGraw-Hill.

### **ARTICLES**

- Banning, Marlia E. 2004. "The Limits of PC Discourse: Linking Language Use to Social Practice." *Pedagogy* 4(2): 191-214.
- Barsky, Allan E., & Lorinda Wood. 2005. "Conflict Avoidance in a University Context." *Higher Education Research & Development* 24(3): 249-264.
- Cannon, Lynn Weber. 1990. "Fostering Positive Race, Class, and Gender Dynamics in the Classroom." *Women's Studies Quarterly* 18(1/2): 126-134.
- Frederick, Peter. 1995. "Walking on Eggs: Mastering the Dreaded Diversity Discussion." *College Teaching* 43(3): 83-92.
- Gay, Geneva. 2013. "Teaching To and Through Cultural Diversity." *Curriculum Inquiry* 43(1): 48-70.
- Gayle, Barbara Mae, Derek Cortez, & Raymond W. Preiss. 2013. "Safe Spaces, Difficult Dialogues, and Critical Thinking." *International Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning* 7(2): 1-8.
- Hirschy, Amy S., & John M. Braxton. 2004. "Effects of Student Classroom Incivilities on Students." *New Directions for Teaching and Learning* 99: 67-76.
- Holley, Lynn C., & Sue Steiner. 2005. "Safe Space: Student Perspectives on Classroom Environment." *Journal of Social Work Education* 41(1): 49-64.

- Johns, Michael, Toni Schmader, & Andy Martens. 2005. "Knowing is Half the Battle: Teaching Stereotype Threat as a Means of Improving Women's Math Performance." *Psychological Science* 16(3): 175-179.
- Keely, Stuart M., Kenneth M. Shemberg, Brenda S. Cowell, & Brian J. Zinnbauer. 1995. "Coping with Student Resistance to Critical Thinking: What the Psychotherapy Literature Can Tell Us." *College Teaching* 43(4): 140-145.
- Lusk, Amy B., & Adam S. Weinberg. 1994. "Discussing Controversial Topics in the Classroom: Creating a Context for Learning." *Teaching Sociology* 22(4): 301-308.
- Martin, Sonya N., Catherine Milne, Kathryn Scantlebury. 2006. "Eye-Rollers, Risk-Takers, and Turn Sharks: Target Students in a Professional Science Education Program." *Journal of Research in Science Teaching* 43(8): 819-851.
- Meyers, Steven A. 2003. "Strategies to Prevent and Reduce Conflict in College Classrooms." *College Teaching* 51(3): 94-98.
- Nadal, Kevin L., Yinglee Wong, Katie E. Griffin, Kristin Davidoff, & Julie Sriken. 2014. "The Adverse Impact of Racial Microaggressions on College Students' Self-Esteem." *Journal of College Student Development* 55(5): 461-474.
- Pasque, Penny A., Mark A. Chesler, Jessica Charbeneau, & Corissa Carlson. 2013. "Pedagogical Approaches to Student Racial Conflict in the Classroom." *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education* 6(1): 1-16.
- Pittman, Chavella T. 2010. "Race and Gender Oppression in the Classroom: The Experiences of Women Faculty of Color with White Male Students." *Teaching Sociology* 38(3): 183-196.
- Roberts, Alison, & Keri Iyall Smith. 2002. "Managing Emotions in the College Classroom: The Cultural Diversity Course as an Example." *Teaching Sociology* 30(3): 291-301.
- Taylor, Jennifer F. 2002. "Facilitating Difficult Discussions: Processing the September 11 Attacks in Undergraduate Classrooms." *Analyses of Social Issues and Public Policy* 2(1): 143-150.
- White, John. 2011. "Resistance to Classroom Participation: Minority Students, Academic Discourse, Cultural Conflicts, and Issues of Representation in Whole Class Discussions." *Journal of Language, Identity, and Education* 10(4): 250-265.
- Zumbrunn, Sharon, Courtney McKim, Eric Buhs, & Leslie R. Hawley. 2014. "Support, Belonging, Motivation, and Engagement in the College Classroom: A Mixed Method Study." *Instructional Science* 42(5): 661-684.

*\*This resource list is not meant to be exhaustive or to necessarily represent the "canon" of resources on conflict in the classroom. A substantial amount of resources can also be found online, and several resources are available through the Kaneb Center library.\**

## NOTES