

# Conflict as a Tool for Learning



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# Conflict is prevalent

Recent research demonstrates that there are increasing levels of

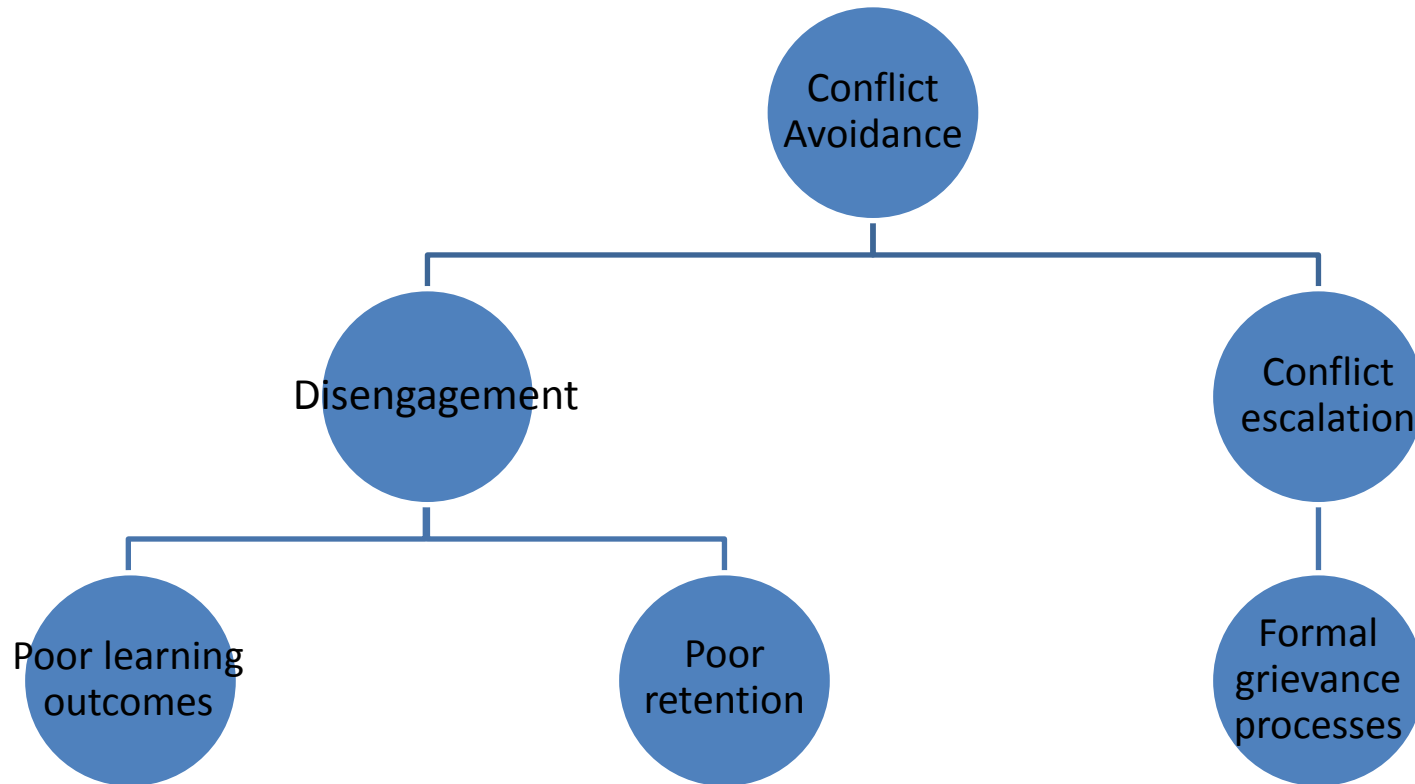
- student/student conflict
- student/staff conflict
- student grievances with universities

# However...

Research also shows that many universities do not manage those conflicts in the most effective manner.

- Conflict in universities tends to be avoided (by students and staff alike)
- Which leads to disengagement and/or conflict escalation
- Resulting in poor retention/completion rates and/or expensive formal grievance processes.

# However...



# Conflict can be positive in universities!

- Opportunity for learning and creation of new knowledge.

*“Conflict over ideas, research methods, and analysis and interpretation of data advances knowledge and is a fundamental part of academic institutions. New knowledge is created by conflict, thus making conflict both inevitable and necessary in higher education.”*

[J. L. Brockman, Colbert, Joel, A., & Hass, M., 2011](#)

- Opportunity for skills development in action.
- Opportunity for greater understanding, relationship-building and engagement.

# Improving students' capacity to constructively manage conflict is

## Good for students

- Improves student experience at university
- Enhances student learning
- Generic skills useful for students outside university

## Good for universities

- Enhances learning and teaching
- Promotes engagement and retention
- Reduces number of formal grievances

# Teaching conflict management skills at university

- Conflict specific subject/s
- Learning through conflict itself, skills development embedded in:
  - curriculum and pedagogy
  - institutional practices

# Embedding in curriculum and pedagogy





# WHY: Embedding in curriculum and pedagogy

- The proposed approach to embed these skills into the curriculum is not new to higher education.
- Embedding methods already implemented for other generic skills like communication and critical thinking.
- However, such an approach is in its infancy for conflict management skills.
- “As the reading and writing practices that students need to learn are specific to their discipline, these discipline-specific literacies are most effectively learned in conjunction with course content. In fact, the task of learning course content can be restated as becoming literate in the different and specific ways of particular fields of knowledge. In an integrated approach, the literacy demands of the discipline become an explicit part of the subjects that students study.”

# WHY: Embedding in curriculum and pedagogy

- Time on task/overcrowding curriculum
- Content/discipline specific
- Links – integrated curriculum
- Real world

# WHY: Embedding in curriculum and pedagogy

Examples:

- Elevator Pitches – 1 min to explain main points from a paper (content and oral communication)
- Case study – exploring a current discipline issue with ethical implications (content, critical thinking and ethical judgement)
- Focus questions – re- read paper from different perspectives (content, reading and critical analysis)

# WHY: Embedding in curriculum and pedagogy

**Systemic** when it is:

- • formally integrated in all course structures

**Sustainable** when it is:

- • 'owned' by faculties, responsible for policy/ curriculum development;
- • shifted from remedial/add-on to developmental/ integrated strategies;
- • integrated throughout degree: from foundation to work-ready;
- • supported by on-going curriculum, PD & collaborative teaching.

# Embedding conflict management skills development

## Learning through conflict itself

- Teachers and university staff modeling good conflict management
- Student opportunities to practice good conflict management (in and out of class)
- Using both intentionally created and naturally arising conflict

# Conflict Management Values and Skills

## SKILLS:

- Listening
- Share opinions in a constructive way
- Engage in negotiation and collaborative problem-solving

## VALUES:

- Approaching conflict as an opportunity for learning
- Openness to others' opinions
- Respect for diversity and difference
- Recognition of and respect for individual choice and self-determination
- Valuing informed decision-making

# Course Design

Action	Conflict management skills/values
Explicitly refer to student feedback (positive and negative) from previous course offerings – closing the loop	Also models valuing and taking into account others' opinions, presenting own opinions constructively
Explicitly set contradictory readings on important points (e.g. journal article and critical response), not just for the sake of evaluating the content or deciding who is 'right', but also for the sake of learning from the actual difference of opinion and how it is managed.	Conflict as opportunity for learning. How to constructively manage differences of opinion.
Incorporate assessment based on management of conflict (e.g. responding to feedback)	Conflict as opportunity for learning. How to constructively manage differences of opinion.

# Course Design (cont.)

Action	Conflict management skills/values
Negotiated content	
Negotiated assessment tasks	
Class negotiated assessment criteria	Listening and presenting opinions Managing differences of opinion Group process management Decision making processes Fully informed decision making



# Learning activities - facilitation

Action	Conflict management skills/values
Being explicit about teacher's opinions and when they are different from others, being open to and inviting disagreement/critical feedback.	Modeling how to constructively manage differences of opinion.
Explicitly explain choices about content, process.	Modeling openness to student conflict with teacher.
Provide opportunities for feedback on and disagreements about content and process of course	
Provide choices for students about content/process.	

# Learning activities – in class

Action	Conflict management skills/values
Ask students to share what they disagree with in the content.	
Ask students to find another student who has a different point of view and discuss.	
Set up in-class debates, and ask students to debate the other side to the one they think is right.	
Students disagree in class discussion, teacher explicitly facilitates appropriate discussion about differences when they arise (e.g. gender, race, socio-economic, etc.)	

# Learning activities - group work

Action	Conflict management skills/values
Pre-group work activities about managing conflict	
Explicitly including criteria about managing conflict in the group	
Providing a process for students to reflect on how conflict is managed in the group.	
Creating multi-discipline groups with different perspectives/priorities on a project	
Providing a process for students to manage conflict in the group when it arises.	

# Assessment

Action	Conflict management skills/values

# Embedding in institutional practices



“The institution’s commitment to educating the whole student requires an intentional focus on the student’s academic/professional development as well as the student’s psychosocial development. We are constantly and intentionally engaged in student development and learning in the ever-expanding extended classroom. The disequilibrium created from student conflicts and student conduct issues, therefore, becomes a natural experiential stage from which educators can direct a student’s personal growth and influence the community’s definition of a just society.”

Simone Himbeault Taylor and Donica Thomas Varner, ‘When student learning and law merge to create educational student conflict resolution and effective conduct management programs’ in Jennifer Meyer Schrage and Nancy Geist Giacomini (Eds.), *Reframing Campus Conflict: Student Conduct Practice Through a Social Justice Lens* (2009) Stylus Publishing, p.24.

# Organisational commitment to:

- Preventing conflict where possible;
- Strengthening individual capacities to manage conflict that does arise; and
- Promoting democracy and democratic values.

# HOW: Embedding in institutional practice

- Encouraging open raising of complaints and grievances.
- Listening to students' concerns.
- Being open to other opinions.
- Presenting own opinions constructively.
- Providing support for students to constructively manage conflict (before formal grievance processes)
  - Conflict coaching
  - Negotiation support
  - Restorative justice circles
  - Mediation / facilitated conversations