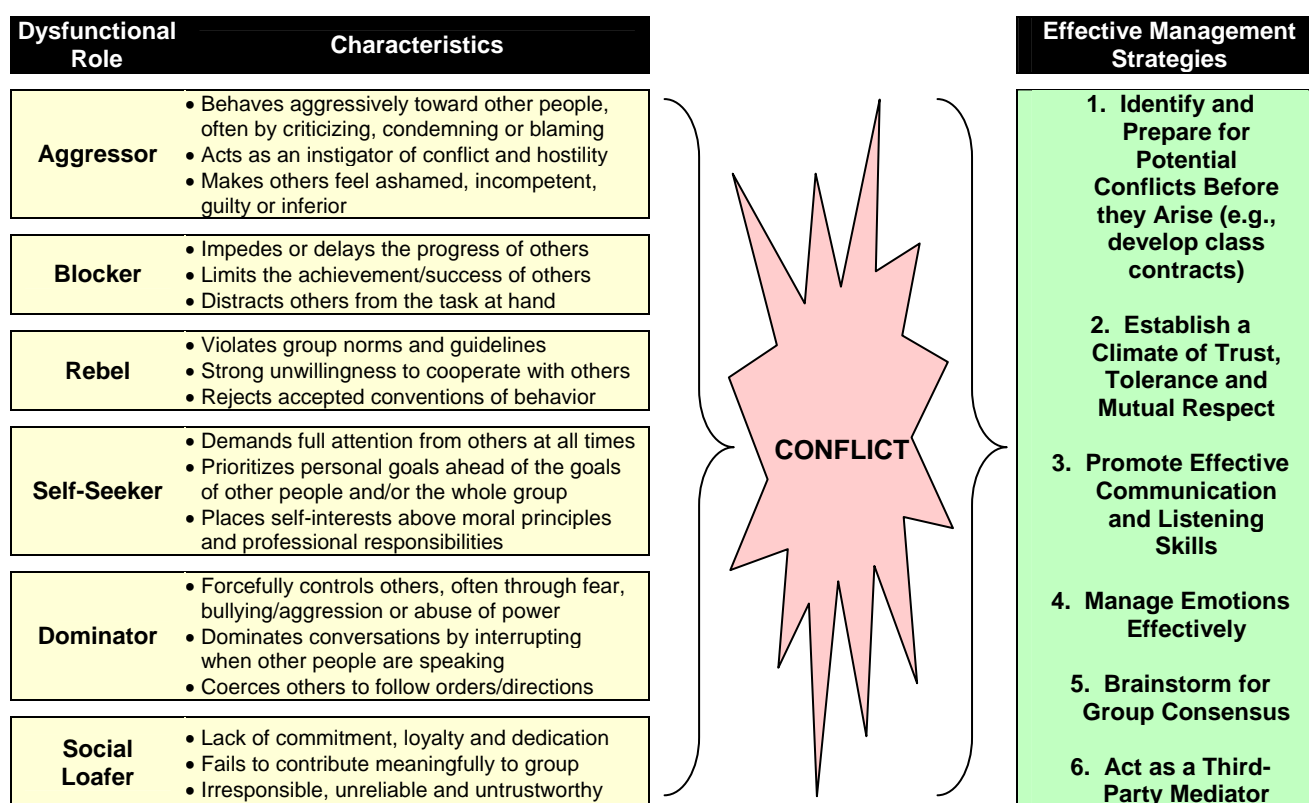


Managing Cross-Cultural Conflict Productively

Conflict may arise in the classroom environment due to issues such as personality clashes, goal incompatibility, differences in judgment, uncooperative behaviour and cultural misunderstandings. If conflict is not addressed and instead is allowed to escalate, students may feel frustrated, upset, and even act aggressively. This may result in a hostile class environment where students do not feel safe to participate.

However, conflict can be managed effectively to achieve learning through greater understanding of the problems, issues and opinions being debated or contested. Dealing with conflict effectively requires various communication and listening skills, paired with assertiveness and intercultural competencies such as mutual respect, empathy and sensitivity toward others. This document describes some common instigators of classroom conflict, and recommended strategies to help students find respectful and culturally inclusive ways of managing and resolving tension.

Common dysfunctional behaviours causing conflict and suggested management strategies



Strategies, Tips and Good Practice Examples

1. Identify and Prepare for Potential Conflicts Before they Arise

- Anticipate topics, teaching material or learning activities may cause controversy and actively plan how to manage it.
- Establish ground rules or norms about acceptable behaviour when discussing controversial issues and how to resolve any conflicts that arise. For example, in the first tutorial develop an activity that helps students reflect on their experience of effective and ineffective groups. Develop a contract or class agreement about appropriate behaviour. Review ground rules periodically.

2. Establish a Climate of Trust, Tolerance and Mutual Respect

- Include classroom civilities – such as active listening, tolerance, and respect for diversity – as expected learning outcomes of the course or topic being studied

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- Focus on similarities between students by using introduction systems (e.g., icebreakers) and ‘getting to know you’ activities that minimise perceived differences between people from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds – for example, focus on students’ common interest in the discipline; choice of the same university campus; favourite music, celebrity, movie etc.
- Model appropriate levels of self-disclosure so that students recognise the importance of maintaining confidentiality in group situations (e.g., sensitive information disclosed in small groups should not be publicised to others without the consent of all group members)
- Use controversial statements made by students (e.g., racist comments) as a resource for intellectual development. For example, respond neutrally to inappropriate remarks by actively listening, paraphrasing, requesting supporting evidence, critiquing the underlying assumptions, and asking other students’ for alternative viewpoints (e.g., “does anyone have another perspective on this?”).
- Always ask students to provide evidence to back up statements (e.g., are claims made on the basis of theoretical literature, empirical research, media influences, past experiences, cultural beliefs, etc.). This allows students to recognise the wider socio-cultural context of thinking about issues.
- Gently encourage students to overcome resistance to alternative views by designing independent learning tasks (e.g., assessment which requires students to weight the evidence for and against a political, ethical or moral issue they feel strongly about, or evaluate materials or media reports which transmit a biased message), or have each student debate a topic from two opposing perspectives.
- If factual knowledge is not being tested, avoid assessment tasks requiring true/false responses, as they may stifle students’ consideration of opposing positions on an issue. Instead, explore tasks that challenge students to critique issues, develop arguments with supporting evidence etc.

3. Promote Effective Communication and Listening Skills

- Teach students active listening skills, such as a) attending to the person that is speaking, b) inviting them to elaborate on thoughts and feelings, c) reflecting on what has been communicated, and d) checking understanding by re-stating key messages and asking for more information, if necessary.
- Promote perspective-taking by asking students to “step into another person’s shoes” and understand their point of view.
- During class discussions, ask students to paraphrase the views of the previous speaker/s before voicing their opinion. Paraphrasing demonstrates mutual respect and helps students distinguish between observation and interpretation of communicated messages.
- Discourage classroom incivilities such as interrupting conversations and “tuning out” of discussions. Request that students listen carefully, respectfully and open-mindedly while others’ are speaking.
- Encourage students to use “I” statements (e.g., “I feel that...”, “I find...”) to express their ideas assertively, confidently and respectfully, rather than speaking aggressively or remaining passive.

4. Manage Emotions Effectively

- Encourage students to recognise and understand the nature and source of their own emotions, as well as the emotions of others. Emphasise that it is important to acknowledge others’ feelings as legitimate, because denying their existence or validity is likely to escalate group tensions further.
- Teach students to express their feelings in a calm and non-confrontational way, for example using “I” statements (e.g., “I feel upset because...” rather than “You made me upset by...”).
- Ask students to refrain from reacting emotionally to emotional outbursts by practicing active listening instead (which demonstrate understanding of the speakers’ feelings).
- If students find it difficult to remain calm, suggest a “mediation break” to reduce tensions and arousal levels. A brief time-out gives students the opportunity to recollect their thoughts and plan an effective response, rather than reacting automatically which often makes the situation worse.
- As a teacher, manage your own emotions by regularly debriefing with other staff and/or referrals to qualified professionals (seek referrals through the Office of HRM).

5. Brainstorm for Group Consensus

- To assist conflict resolution, ask students to decide what issues they can and cannot compromise on (and reiterate that effective resolution usually requires compromise by both parties) and ensure that their expectations for a solution are realistic and reasonable.
- Focus on the problematic issues underlying the conflict, rather than the emotions or people involved.
- Encourage students to consider different ideas and either a) agree on a preferred option/solution, or b) agree on a new, more effective option/solution.

6. Act as a Third-Party Mediator

- If conflict becomes too intense, act as a mediator to a) separate students from the problem, b) focus attention toward shared interests; c) insist on using objectivity to resolve disputes; and d) provide options or solutions that have mutual gain. It is best to avoid imposing a decision, but rather allow students to decide for themselves and achieve a harmonious win-win solution.

Self-Development Checklist

10 Questions to Guide Self-Reflection: Managing Cross-Cultural Conflict

1. To what extent do you anticipate and prepare for conflict, controversy and disagreement in the classroom?
2. To what extent have you clearly articulated classroom norms, expectations and guidelines for managing conflict?
3. What learning activities do you currently use that highlight similarities, rather than differences, between students from different social, cultural, linguistic, religious and/or educational backgrounds?
4. To what extent to your assessment tasks encourage students to shift from dichotomous “all-or-none” thinking toward more open-minded, flexible and unbiased thinking?
5. How often do you ask students to provide evidence or justification for narrow-minded beliefs, biased statements, black-or-white perspectives, etc.?
6. How much time do you devote to teach students conflict resolution skills such as active listening, paraphrasing, reflection, perspective-taking, emotional management, and negotiation?
7. To what extent do you model and reinforce assertiveness – that is, communicating your needs, desires, feelings, beliefs and opinions to others in a direct, honest, and respectful manner?
8. How often do you ask students to take “time-out” to remove (physically or emotionally) themselves from conflict situations when tension and emotional arousal escalates to high?
9. How frequently do you take “time-out” to debrief with others (e.g., colleagues, family/friends, EAP support personnel) after experiencing emotionally charged classroom conflicts?
10. If students cannot resolve conflicts themselves, what steps do you normally take to facilitate reaching a mutually-satisfying group consensus? How are these processes communicated to students?

References and Further Resources

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