International Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education 2006, Volume 18, Number 3, 180-187
http://www.isetl.org/ijtlhe/ ISSN 1812-9129

How Do Faculty Experience and Respond to Classroom Conflict?

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We present descriptive data about the nature and correlates of classroom conflict using a national sample of 226 faculty members. We differentiated two different types of conflict, inattentive versus hostile, in our survey. Levels of conflict were not associated with instructors' demographic traits or characteristics of their courses, but were related to professors' choice of teaching methods, their demeanor, and how they responded to challenging situations. We also found that those conflict management techniques that address the relationship between faculty and students were most effective in reducing conflict.

Boice (2000) asserted "no experience of new faculty as teachers, in my observation, is so dramatic and traumatizing as facing unruly, uninvolved students" (p. 81). In fact, interpersonal conflicts in college classrooms are common, disruptive, and significantly affect how faculty and students feel about a particular course. Some forms of conflict are hostile and overt (Goss, 1999). Students may disparage the instructor, argue with classmates, or actively dispute course requirements and their grades. Other conflicts stem from students' inattentiveness and appear more passive, such as students arriving chronically late to class, engaging in side conversations, or acting apathetic and bored (Appleby, 1990; Kearney & Plax, 1992).

Despite its importance, remarkably few investigators have explored this critical topic from an empirical perspective. As such, we gathered descriptive data about the nature and correlates of classroom conflict using a national sample of psychology faculty for this study. We also investigated the different techniques that instructors used to prevent or reduce conflict and assessed the effectiveness of each.

Representative Research on Conflict

Foundational Research on Personal Conflict

Current understanding about the origins of and remedies for classroom conflict is generally derived from social psychological research regarding personal conflict. This literature suggests that many interpersonal conflicts stem from competing interests between people (Sherif, 1966), perceived injustices in which individuals feel that the benefits they derive from a situation are not proportional to their effort and work (Greenberg, 1986), and misperceptions about another person's intentions (Allred, 2000). Conflicts are compounded by ambiguous communication, a failure to consider a different perspective, and an autocratic approach to exercising power (Coleman, 2000; Krauss & Morsella, 2000). Researchers in social psychology have also described effective ways to resolve conflict at the individual and group levels. These strategies include using open communication to acknowledge and validate each other's position, identifying common interests and goals, and having mutual participation in solving the problem (Deutsch, 2000; Schulz & Pruitt, 1978).

Conflict in College Classrooms

In his qualitative examination of incivility in the college classroom, Boice (1996, 2000) described conflict as the product of an escalating interplay between instructors' and students' misbehaviors. Boice found that faculty contributed to classroom conflict by seeming cold and uncaring, arriving late to class, disparaging students, presenting material too rapidly, and surprising students in terms of testing or grading practices. He similarly reported that students fueled classroom incivility by conversing loudly during class, speaking sarcastically, taunting classmates, and arriving late to class or leaving early in a disruptive manner. Finally, Boice found that students and faculty tended to blame each other as the primary contributor to hostility.

A converging line of research has examined the importance of professors' immediacy as a determinant of the emotional climate of the college classroom (Wilson & Taylor, 2001). Immediacy refers to those verbal and nonverbal communications that outwardly manifest instructors' care for students, for example, instructors' expressions of interest in the lives of students, remembering students' names, and communicating availability. Examples of physical immediacy include eye contact, open body posture, smiling, and respectful listening (Kearney & Plax, 1992; Wilson & Taylor). Levels of immediacy are directly related to students' motivation and inversely associated with students' disruptiveness (McCroskey & Richmond, 1992).

Researchers have also explored classroom conflict from students' perspective. Using data gathered from undergraduates, Tantleff-Dunn, Dunn, and Gokee

(2002) reported that student-faculty conflict most often occurred with regard to grade disputes, unfair exam content or scoring, disagreements regarding the validity of students' excuses, professors' interpersonal conduct, and perceived teaching deficits. Respondents suggested that faculty often handled conflict in ways that dissatisfied students (e.g., acting defensively, retaliating, humiliating the student, denying the problem).

The majority of the literature on classroom conflict offers strategies to prevent or reduce disruptions. These writings provide helpful advice but are seldom informed by empirical evidence. For instance, Amada (1994) recommended administrative procedures for coping with disruptive students (e.g., documenting inappropriate behaviors, referring students for counseling, mobilizing campus security personnel). Other authors described ways to use comprehensive problem-solving procedures to manage classroom conflict (Holton, 1998; Kuhlenschmidt & Layne, 1999). These methods include broaching conflicts as soon as possible, choosing an appropriate time and place for discussions, clearly defining the problem, brainstorming solutions, and implementing a plan of action. Many effective methods to prevent or reduce conflict underscore the importance of maintaining positive working alliances with students (Tiberius & Billson, 1991). Specifically, faculty members foster working alliances when they build rapport with their students, develop shared instructional goals, and resolve disputes by involving students in discussions that convey respect and empathy (cf. Buskist & Saville, 2004; Tiberius & Flak, 1999).

Aim of the Current Investigation

To extend knowledge in this area, our study empirically assessed (a) whether inattentive conflict can be differentiated from hostile conflict, (b) whether characteristics of courses and instructors' demographic traits related to classroom conflict, (c) whether instructors' preparation and expression of care toward students correlated with levels of classroom conflict, and (d) the extent to which instructors used different conflict management strategies and the perceived effectiveness of each technique.

Method

Participants and Procedure

We mailed our survey to a random sample of 1,000 members of the American Psychological Association (APA) who indicated on their membership applications that teaching was their primary occupation. Two hundred and twenty-six psychology faculty members (109 men, 117 women) completed and returned the instrument. Participants reported their racial and ethnic backgrounds as European American (84.5%), African American (5.4%), Hispanic American (2.7%), Asian American (1.4%), or Other/Mixed heritage (4.5%). The mean age was 51 years (SD = 10.8).

Almost all respondents had their doctorate (98.7%) and had considerable teaching experience (M = 20.0 years, SD = 10.8). The majority held full-time appointments (88.6%) in a range of higher education settings, including research-oriented universities (23.2%), comprehensive universities (34.5%), liberal arts colleges (33.2%), and community colleges (9.1%). About half of our participants (54.7%) indicated that they had completed some form of training in college teaching during their careers.

Measure

Participants anonymously completed a 71-item questionnaire that assessed (a) demographic characteristics; (b) characteristics of the course in which they experienced the greatest amount of classroom conflict; (c) the frequency of 17 conflictual behaviors, as rated on a 4-point scale; (d) their perceived success in managing each conflictual behavior, as rated on a 4-point scale; (e) how often they demonstrated seven uncaring or unprepared behaviors; (f) the strategies that they used to manage classroom conflict, given a list of 15 commonly identified techniques; and (g) the perceived success of each conflict resolution technique used, as rated on a 4-point scale.

Given the lack of relevant well-developed measures, we generated survey items based on information from the literature. More specifically, we derived our series of conflictual behaviors from Boice's (1996) list of common forms of classroom incivility and Appleby's (1990) description of disruptive student behaviors. Boice's list of faculty actions that promote classroom incivility formed the foundation of our items assessing instructors' uncaring behavior and unpreparedness. Finally, we measured a range of conflict management techniques. This list included those that focused on the working alliance between faculty and students (based on Tiberius & Flak, 1999) as well as other commonly used, pragmatic strategies that are not relationally-minded (cf. Indiana University Center for Survey Research, 2000).

Our survey instrument expressly asked respondents to answer all questions in reference to a single course that they recently taught in which they experienced a high level of classroom conflict. Our restricted focus on instructors' experiences in the context of one class is consistent with other researchers' measurement strategies (e.g., Boice, 1996; Indiana University Center

for Survey Research, 2000; Tantleff-Dunn et al., 2002). Moreover, professors would presumably have more vivid memories of a particularly troublesome class, which facilitated their ability to answer our behaviorally anchored questionnaire.

To reduce our data and create scales, we conducted two sets of factor analyses on individual items. We also chose this approach to determine the underlying structure and patterns among the various items used to evaluate classroom conflict and its correlates.

First, we submitted the 17 items assessing different conflictual behaviors to a factor analysis with Varimax rotation. Two factors reliably emerged from this analysis that accounted for 43% of the total variance. The first factor measured *inattentive conflict* (eigenvalue = 3.79). Six items had factor loadings of .40 or higher: students arriving late or leaving early (.71), being inattentive or displaying little interest (.69), being absent from important classes (.68), coming unprepared for class (.67), sleeping during class (.64), and talking inappropriately during class (.52). The second factor (eigenvalue = 1.37) measured *hostile conflict* and consisted of five items: students protesting your assignments (.73), complaining about exams (.71), arguing with you (.69), complaining about your teaching style (.45), and eating or drinking noisily (.43). This analysis allowed us to create four scales by using the standardized regression residuals: overall level of inattentive conflict, perceived overall success in managing inattentive conflict, overall level of hostile conflict, and perceived overall success in managing hostile conflict.

We conducted another factor analysis with Varimax rotation using the seven items that focused on instructor behaviors. Two factors reliably emerged from this analysis that accounted for 41% of the total variance. The first factor reflected *faculty unpreparedness* (eigenvalue = 1.74) and consisted of four items with factor loadings of .40 or higher: I was unprepared for class (.68), I arrived late to class (.64), I surprised students with tests or their grades (.59), and I included material that was too advanced for the course (.43). The second factor (eigenvalue = 1.14) measured professors' *uncaring demeanor* and included three items: I appeared distant or uncaring (.73), I delivered rapidly paced lectures that students had difficulty following (.72), and I made remarks or comments that students perceived as offensive (.52).

Results

Descriptive Data Regarding Conflict-Laden Classes

Most participants (79.3%) indicated that their most recent, conflict-laden course was an undergraduate-level class with an average enrollment of 37 students (*SD* = 42). Faculty indicated that they primarily lectured in this class (58.3% of class time devoted to lecturing) rather than using discussion or active learning techniques (26.1% and 15.6% of class time, respectively).

Correlates of Classroom Conflict

We next assessed whether course characteristics and instructor demographic traits related to levels of conflict. We conducted a series of *t* tests and bivariate correlations to determine whether the number of enrolled students, course level, or use of various pedagogical methods related to hostile or inattentive conflict (see Tables 1 and 2).

Although class size was unrelated to conflict, instructors reported that undergraduate-level classes had higher levels of inattentive conflict than graduate courses. In addition, the use of lecture correlated directly with inattentive classroom conflict. On the other hand, using discussion or active learning related inversely with inattentive classroom conflict.

We also explored whether faculty characteristics correlated with the likelihood of experiencing problems in the classroom. We analyzed the relation between instructors' gender, race, age, years teaching, full-time versus part-time status, and completing a course in college teaching with inattentive and hostile conflict; however, no significant findings emerged in any of these analyses. In addition, we examined whether faculty members' uncaring behaviors or unpreparedness related to classroom disruptions. Instructors who endorsed uncaring behaviors experienced higher levels of hostile conflict.

Management of Conflict

Our final set of analyses focused on the extent to which faculty believed that they successfully managed conflict and the particular techniques they used to accomplish this goal. Toward this end, we examined instructors' preferred conflict management strategies as well as their perceived effectiveness. Table 3 lists the tactics that respondents used to control conflict after it occurred. Many instructors stated that they dealt with conflict by communicating respect, interest, and warmth to students; addressing the students outside of class; focusing on students' feelings and expressing empathy; and clarifying the goals and agenda for the course to ensure that students found them meaningful. Conversely, instructors eschewed more administrative conflict management strategies (e.g., dropping a student from the class, reporting the student to a university administrator).

In general, faculty rated their most frequently used techniques as most successful. Strategies such as

TABLE 1
Associations Between Categorical Instructor and Course Variables with Types of Conflict

Variable	*n*	Inattentive conflict[a] *M*	*SD*	*t*	Hostile conflict[a] *M*	*SD*	*t*
Level of course				30.66**			1.08
Undergraduate	176	.16	.92		-.04	.95	
Graduate	43	-.71	.98		.14	1.15	
Instructor's gender				.43			.33
Male	108	-.05	.97		-.04	.88	
Female	117	.04	1.03		.04	1.10	
Instructor's race				.31			2.64
White	190	.01	.96		-.06	.95	
Person of color	31	-.10	1.26		.25	1.18	
Status				1.66			.36
Full-time faculty	194	-.02	1.02		-.01	1.01	
Part-time faculty	25	.25	.84		.11	1.04	
Pedagogy course				.67			1.18
Yes	122	.06	1.07		.07	1.07	
No	100	-.05	.90		-.08	.90	

[a]Standardized variable.
**$p < .01$.

TABLE 2
Associations Between Instructor and Course Variables with Types of Conflict

Variable	Inattentive conflict	Hostile conflict
Class size	.13	-.01
Percent lecture	.21**	-.03
Percent discussion	-.15*	-.02
Percent active learning	-.15*	.05
Instructor's age	.00	-.02
Years teaching	.00	-.04
Instructor uncaring behavior	.11	.30**
Instructor unpreparedness	.01	.05

Note. *n*'s range between 212 and 225 because of missing data.
*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$.

communicating respect, clarifying course goals, involving students in solving the problem, and encouraging a sense of classroom community received the highest effectiveness scores when individually rated. As a complementary way to assess the extent to which each management strategy reduced levels of conflict, we correlated instructors' use of these 15 techniques with instructors' aggregated ratings of their perceived success in reducing inattentive and hostile conflict (see Table 3, columns 4 and 5). We found the strongest correlations between the use of alliance-enhancing strategies and conflict reduction. These associations were greater for the effective management of inattentive rather than hostile disruptions. In general, though, the degree to which faculty members perceived that they successfully managed inattentive conflict was strongly associated with their perceived ability to reduce hostile conflict, $r(191) = .53$, $p < .01$.

Discussion

Our results provide important additions to the literature in terms of understanding college-level classroom conflict. First, we empirically differentiated between two types of classroom disruptions: inattentive and hostile forms of conflict. These results supported the distinctions described by Appleby (1990) and others, which had not been verified to date. We found that these two forms of classroom disruption were associated with different precipitating factors.

Second, we found that the amount of conflict that faculty reported was actually unrelated to many characteristics of courses or instructors. Perhaps most surprising was the lack of differences occurring as a function of professors' demographic characteristics (i.e., race, gender, age, and years of teaching), which contradict the findings of some other writers (e.g., Harlow, 2003). Previous research has documented that

TABLE 3
Conflict Management Strategies Used by Instructors: Frequency, Perceived Effectiveness, and Correlations with Types of Conflict

Strategy employed	Percentage employing the strategy	Mean success of the strategy [a]	Success managing inattentive conflict [b,c]	Success managing hostile conflict [b,d]
Communicated respect, interest, and warmth toward the student	78.8	2.45 (.67)	.24**	.19**
Addressed the student(s) outside of class	74.3	2.25 (.83)	.07	.03
Focused on feelings and empathized	65.5	2.22 (.77)	.18**	.06
Clarified goals and agenda for course; ensured meaningful goals	64.6	2.38 (.71)	.13*	-.09
Ignored the problem	61.5	1.21 (.91)	-.29**	-.09
Considered how your behavior contributed to the problem	58.4	1.96 (.85)	.13*	-.01
Encouraged classroom community	54.0	2.25 (.76)	.15*	.12
Addressed student in front of class	53.1	1.72 (1.01)	.04	.04
Consulted with a colleague	47.8	1.83 (.86)	.07	-.10
Involved students in solving the problem	43.4	2.34 (.82)	.23**	.05
Changed course requirements/deadlines	35.4	1.81 (1.06)	-.01	-.15*
Reported behavior to university official	27.9	.76 (1.03)	.08	-.05
Changed your teaching style	27.0	1.69 (.90)	.08	-.02
Changed grading criteria	18.1	.98 (1.11)	.00	-.08
Dropped student from class	11.9	.96 (1.26)	.10	-.03

[a] Mean and standard deviation presented. Scores on a 4 point scale (0 = *not at all successful*; 3 = *very successful*).
[b] Bivariate correlation between use of strategy and perceived success in managing type of conflict. [c] $n = 223$. [d] $n = 193$.
$*p < .05$. $**p < .01$.

students tend to challenge the authority of female professors and faculty of color more often than they do when interacting with white male faculty. This trend is evident when students question the legitimacy of female and minority professors or require them to justify their teaching methods and defend their knowledge or opinions (Moore, 1996; Turner & Myers, 2000). Such challenges from students recapitulate broader teaching struggles experienced by many women and minority faculty in academia, including disproportionately teaching large, undergraduate sections and the additional mentoring responsibilities that they often shoulder (Aguirre, 2000).

The disparity between our findings and others' may be related to the fact we used a quantitative approach, whereas previous studies have generally relied on qualitative methods. Similarly, the inappropriate challenges to authority that are disproportionately experienced by female and minority faculty members may not be synonymous with classroom conflict as we defined it in this investigation. However, past studies have documented certain similar experiences that occur across the lines of faculty race, gender, and age. For instance, student ratings of instructor effectiveness are generally equivalent across all demographic groups (Marsh & Roche, 1997). In addition, most female and minority faculty members do not report discriminatory treatment from their students in the classroom (Bronstein & Farnsworth, 1998).

On the other hand, we found conflict to be associated with instructors' choice of teaching methods, their demeanor, and how they responded to challenging situations. The precise pattern of associations depended on the type of conflict. Hostile conflict related to whether faculty expressed care towards students, communicated respect, behaved sensitively, and remained warm and engaged. Inattentive conflict was associated with a greater number of factors. More

specifically, instructors' use of interactive teaching techniques, such as discussion and active learning in lieu of lecture, related to fewer inattentive disruptions. In addition, instructors who conveyed respect, focused on students' feelings, ensured meaningful class goals, engaged in critical self-examination, and involved students when resolving disagreements had fewer inattentive conflicts as well.

In general, we found the most effective strategies to reduce conflict involved enhancing working alliances with students. Professors draw on the working alliance by attending to the emotional bonds that exist in the classroom, promoting a common sense of purpose when teaching, and treating students respectfully despite disagreements. Each of these components may have a role in improving the emotional climate in the classroom. Moreover, the steps involved in forging working alliances overlap with many of the best practices of effective undergraduate instruction (e.g., promoting contact between students and faculty, developing reciprocity and cooperation among students, and using active learning; cf. Chickering & Gamson, 1991).

Professors most often used conflict management strategies that they also rated as successful (e.g., most faculty reported using the technique of communicating respect toward students; this strategy also received the highest success rating). However, involving students in solving problems may be an underused technique, given its lower reported frequency of implementation in comparison to its high success ratings. Other conflict management strategies may actually have an undesirable effect. For instance, ignoring problems (a strategy used by 61.5% of our respondents) was related to poorer outcomes despite its common use. Similarly, changing course requirements and deadlines was associated with greater student hostility. Perhaps instructors acquiesce and ignore problems when they lack the time needed to resolve or grapple with problems at hand.

Several avenues exist for continued exploration of this topic. First, we asked faculty to focus on their most recent conflict-laden class and to describe their own and their students' behavior in this one context. This measurement approach provided respondents with a concrete point of reference and indexed the severity of conflict in that setting. An alternative approach would involve assessing conflict that individual faculty members experience across the different classes that they teach. Perhaps faculty characteristics, such as gender or race, have significant associations with the pervasiveness or breadth of student-faculty conflict rather than with its intensity.

Second, future research can simultaneously consider the intersection between gender, race, and age in terms of the incidence of classroom conflict. For instance, Harlow (2003) suggested that young, African American women in particular have their authority challenged more often than other groups. Quantitative investigations can examine the significance of relevant interaction effects (gender x race or age x gender), providing that researchers use sufficiently large and demographically representative samples of faculty participants.

Third, we relied exclusively on faculty assessment of all variables in our study. Our approach lacked a control for social desirability and contained shared method variance. Thus, our findings could be skewed because of favorable self-presentation or the magnitude of the reported associations may be spuriously inflated. As such, other investigators can verify our findings by obtaining complementary data from students and faculty in a single study.

Finally, changes in levels of classroom conflict can be explored longitudinally. From a practical standpoint, professors are generally most interested in whether the implementation of the techniques that we described reduce the scope of conflict that they personally endure. Future research can expressly explore this question by obtaining baseline data regarding the frequency and intensity of classroom conflict for individual professors, then teaching them relevant strategies to prevent and reduce student disruptions, and ultimately re-assessing conflict levels to detect whether changes have occurred. This research design can determine the extent to which professors' conflict management strategies are amenable to modification, whether these changes produce desired effects, and how long they last following professional development efforts.

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