

# Chapter 13

## Conflict in Online Learning

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### The Importance of Conflict

Among the many definitions of conflict available, Laursen and Hafen (2010) offer the following: ‘conflict entails disagreement, which is manifest in incompatible or opposing behaviors or views. Conflict is distinct from related constructs such as aggression, dominance, competition, and anger; any of these may arise during a conflict, but they are neither necessary nor defining features.’ In the same way that illness is important to a human being, conflict (as represented by Laursen and Hafen 2010) is important to the immune system of any group. As individuals, we need to catch colds and endure fevers, the better to protect ourselves against more serious metabolic assaults; as a group, we must go through periods of conflict to keep together or to pave the way to dissolution and disbandment. ‘No group can be entirely harmonious,’ writes the Conflict Research Consortium (2005), ‘for then it would lack process and structure. Group formation is a result of both association and dissociation, so that both conflict and cooperation serve a social function. Some certain degree of conflict is an essential element in group formation.’ Or as Coser (1956, p. 31) himself writes, six decades earlier, conflict is ‘a form of socialization’. Among other things, Coser (1956) argues in favour of conflict’s role in establishing and maintaining group identities (see below). Indeed, for a group to prevail, the members must respect the idiosyncratic differences of the other members, and often this respect will happen at an instinctive, unconscious level.

However, not all members of a group will either like one another or maintain a steady sense of calm; nor do ‘surface’ displays of tolerance and quasi-respect mean that conflict, by necessity, will be subdued. Conscious attempts made to tolerate a group member’s characteristics, behaviour or personality are deliberate methods of containing and responding to group anxiety; and group anxiety is a valuable

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commodity. If a group does not contain tension or friction—or in the unlikely event that the group members appreciate one another’s individual qualities equally well—the group is slowly drained of life fluid and energy; it becomes apathetic, exhausted, and it dies. Although studies of behaviour and group dynamics might have moved on from what the text *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* (Freud 1921) propounded, we remain in thrall to a group mind (or a herd mind) and it is an extremely wilful person who does not, after a due process of indoctrination, conditioning, or group ‘reasoning’, give up his/her individual ego in favour of the group ideal. But this does not happen immediately, and conflict must precede any such act of brainwashing. Referring to Coser’s (1956) seminal text (*ibid.*), the Conflict Research Consortium (2005) (*ibid.*) continues: ‘Coser (1956) makes a distinction between two types of conflict: that in which the goal is personal and subjective, and that in which the matter in contention has an impersonal, objective aspect.’ The latter is ‘like to be more severe and radical. These are conflicts in which parties understand themselves as representatives of collectives or groups, fighting not for themselves, but rather for the goals and ideals of the group. Elimination of personal reasons tends to make conflict more intense. On the other hand, when parties are pursuing a common goal, objectification of the conflict can serve as a unifying element.’

Put simply, there is no certain long-term future or function for a group that does not create, control and, above all, learn from its own internal conflicts (not to mention the conflicts with forces beyond the group’s boundaries). Furthermore, as educators, we would do well to remember that the learners who enroll in our courses are unpredictable. Previously (Mathew 2011), I argued that the most unpredictable factor in most dynamics is the human being, on the grounds that a piece of technology might well let us down, but in general it will work or it will not work. A human being in a distance learning course is infinitely more variable; or to put it another way, a human being is infinitely more unreliable, which ushers in a host of ironies, of course. However, it might lead us to concede that no group is less likely to prevail than one in which everyone agrees. Without the tension that derives from conflict, the work produced by the learners (for example, on discussion boards) might be patchy, irrespective of subject matter.

Conflict can be used in a variety of ways in an educational setting. In the opinion of Sociology Guide (2014) ‘The explosiveness, the outward costs, and the divisiveness of conflict are so great that it is often difficult to see the ways in which conflict fulfils socially useful functions. Yet it does at least the following three things. First, it promotes loyalty within the group. Second, it signals the needs for, and helps promote, short-run social change. And third, it appears intimately involved in moving societies towards new levels of social integration.’ Or, to expand upon the point: ‘If conflict pits groups and organizations against one another, it also tends to promote unity within each of the conflicting groups. The necessity to work together against a common foe submerges rivalries within the group and people, who otherwise are competitors, to work together in harmony... [It] serves to notify the society that serious problems exist that is (*sic*) not being handled by the traditional social organization. It forces the recognition of those problems and encourages the development of new solutions to them.’

## Conflict's Engine

But how does it work? For most people (and certainly anyone possessed by a punitive superego among their psychic apparatus), conflict is a 'bad' thing, a 'negative' thing—'unnecessary'. It is all too easy, when considering the notion of conflict, to think of political skirmishes and foreign wars, riots at the hands of *homo urbanis* (aided nowadays by one of conflict's cleverer tools, social media), or hooliganism, hate crimes, domestic violence—a relationship (however large the scale) in which power transfers from one party to the other, in which there is a winner and a cowed, blooded, frightened or dead loser. Indeed, if we transfer the argument to a seat of pedagogy, the argument, in the eyes of many, would maintain its hold, at least to a certain extent.

'If a person sees the school in the image of a moral community, a Temple,' write Rozycki and Clabaugh (1999),

conflict seems to be an indication of something wrong. Similarly, the image of the school as Factory tolerates little conflict. But this is primarily because under both images, the school is seen as *monocratic* (emphasis in original), ruled by a single person, or group of people. Consequently, it is the perceptions of the powerholders that become the norm for the entire organization. The principal as moral leader speaks for the school. How subversive, how immoral, to suggest his interests might be narrower than those of the entire community! As director of production in the school factory, the principal looks at conflict as "inefficient", impeding production. Again, to suggest that he might favor personal goals is to attack his competence or sincerity! So it is that our fixation with either image of the school blinds us to the way conflict serves to maintain and enhance groups... Indeed, conflict may occur because it serves the interests of groups, particularly, the interests of group powerholders. In many school systems, board members promote antagonisms between school administrators and teachers because they feel that each group does its own job better that way. Also, such antagonism prevents administrators and teachers from forming a cohesive group against the school board.

Irrespective of any possible bias caused by the writers' country of origin (the U.S.A.) or the focus on learners whose age is younger than those who attend university—even taking into account the fact that this quotation will be 15 years old by the time this chapter is published—it is worth taking a moment to note the similarities with our own experiences. Worth too, perhaps, acknowledging the somewhat ambivalent stance towards the subject that the authors take.

'There are five basic functions which conflict serves both among different groups and within a single group,' Rozycki and Clabaugh (1999) (*ibid.*) continue. 'They are connection, definition, revitalization, reconnaissance and replication.' If conflict is akin to a vehicle—to one of many vehicles—that can drive our learners through a particular course, then we should also acknowledge some of its engine's components. It is Rozycki and Clabaugh's (1999) notions of connection, definition, revitalization, reconnaissance and replication that form conflict's engine, we might say, although not necessarily in the way that those authors would agree with: not only are they the *functions* of conflict among different groups and within a single group; they are also (simultaneously and paradoxically) *the results, the causes and the reasons* for conflict. They are part of the engine, which would not be able to function without them; but without the engine itself, the single parts are all but useless unless transferred to a different vehicle entirely.

## Group Formation

It is easy to underestimate the importance of groups (and the accompanying methodologies) in the online learning milieu. Of course, solitary study is possible and is adamantly preferred by many learners. However, it is not the learners engaged in such study that need concern us for the moment. For the purposes of this paper, the learners are enrolled in an online course (the level of study need not concern us either). To facilitate a ‘classroom’ spirit, or at least the sense of camaraderie, of communal intent, one tool that might be used is the discussion board. When used correctly, the discussion board is simultaneously a social adhesive in the online learning milieu, and a means of gauging how the group is faring (including a sign of who is not providing a contribution). It can also be used as an assessment tool. In other words, not only can boards be used as collection repositories for learners’ thoughts and opinions, they can also be employed as a way of assessing tasks that have been achieved in groups. Indeed, discussion boards are an important part of the learners’ experience, as useful as formative assessment and a ready way of augmenting group-based learner activity. But how do we make them successful?

A successful discussion board will probably display active engagement by the educator. This might include challenges to existing posts or the positioning of deliberately provocative statements to stimulate debate. If the discussion is synchronous (using a tool such as Collaborate, for example), the educator will show signs of knowledge and of wider research or reading; the educator should be prepared and should show clear signs of knowing the material to a high standard. The educator should also have encouraged the learners to have prepared well themselves: the learner who is not prepared will have less to contribute and will understand the discussion less. In a similar way (and in line with any face-to-face discussion), all parties in an online discussion will benefit from being confident with themselves and with sharing their opinions: the educator can encourage individual responses, whether the discussion is synchronous or asynchronous. Furthermore, a good discussion board might show evidence of participants who have considered the ‘five W questions’—who have considered, in other words, ‘what is important about this topic?’ (for example); or ‘when did the event occur?’ Why is this important to the way we live our lives today? And so on.

There are two other matters that should probably be addressed. For a discussion board to be successful as a learning tool, a task must be provided that will both engage the learner and provoke the learner into providing a spirited opinion or comeback. (One example might be a debate.) Long gone are the days when discussion boards were simply where chit-chat occurred, or where people with shared interests could talk through new releases, or unofficially ‘review’ creative work in an atmosphere that veered from the cordial to the corrosive. Those discussion boards could be interesting or they could be dull; to a reasonable extent they gave an alternative to people who lived too far away to meet face to face with any kind of regularity (even if they had wanted to do so). The boards were entertaining, sometimes illuminating, but they can now be used in a wider variety of settings, including education. By using discussion boards, we get to see if and to what extent people’s

views differ; the educator is able to see how an individual learner is dealing with the information that has been provided (by the educator and by the other members of the group). Group formation will occur as the result of disagreements among its members every bit as much as it will as the result of participant harmony: the group is (usually) not a perfect shape; it is jagged, with uneven sides, and people *should* disagree as well as agree. Misunderstandings are not only inevitable (or at least highly probable), they are life-affirming for the group. They help to assert a sense of structure; help to let people know what they might expect from a certain person in a certain situation, next time. From the educator's point of view, therefore, misunderstandings are to the good and should be encouraged (within ethical bounds). At the end of the disagreement, with the group structure (possibly) altered, it is the educator's responsibility to question why the misunderstanding occurred and what the group learned from the experience.

The second matter to be addressed, however, is the fact that many members of staff are anxious about new technologies and also about new methods of working that challenge the status quo. Discussion boards do both; the challenge would seem to be to convince all of the relevant staff to make regular contributions to the discussions, particularly in light of the fact that (in some cases) it has replaced some face-to-face delivery (Hedges et al. 2011). Regular contributions from the staff are the lifeblood of a successful discussion board: without a two-way means of communication, the project is unlikely to succeed for long.

We need problems. We are programmed to seek out forms of challenge and even peril. In an article entitled 'Taking the Non-Problem Seriously', Garland (1982) writes of the group in a psychotherapeutic setting, but the principles remain analogous. Referring to a 'problem' who arrives for treatment 'as representing the nodal point of the system within which his/her pathology exists', Garland (1982) argues that 'if we put him/her into another system, the nodal point will of necessity be altered by this new system.' We might infer, in that case, that the balance in any group system is a delicate, precarious thing. As the author continues:

In a group... we cannot change, directly, the rules governing the individual's pathological transactions within his own system, but we can bring about change in the individual by making him part of a powerful alternative system, in which a different set of rules is operating... we may see every expression of interest and concern manifested in group matters as a step towards an involvement in the alternative system offered by the group, in which the rules, simply by being different, no longer serve to sustain the status quo. (1982, p. 6)

## Conflict in the Group Situation

The success or failure of conflict in a group situation depends on its management. Conflict is a very exacting ingredient: too much and there is the risk run that the group will fall to pieces, either because of (a) factions forming that cannot agree on the simplest tasks, or (b) a collection of individuals forming because no one can agree and no one can appreciate or respect the group leader, who will usually be the tutor. Conflict that is in too short supply, however (as mentioned above), can

weaken the group with inertia and insipidity. Whatever else happens, the conflict that is built into the learning programme must be managed appropriately. The airing of differences, for example, should lead to a situation in which the members of the group are able to come up with both satisfying interpersonal relationships and quality decisions.

Using *Experiences in Groups* (Bion 1961) as one example, Bion was one of the seminal writers on the subject of the life of the group, including what happens on a conscious and an unconscious level; and what is happening on an intra-psychic plane. Stokes (1994: 20) provides us with a useful summary of the phenomenon. He writes:

Bion (1961) distinguished two main tendencies in the life of a group: the tendency towards work on the primary task or work-group mentality, and a second, often unconscious, tendency to avoid work on the primary task, which he termed basic assumption mentality. These opposing tendencies can be thought of as the wish to face and work with reality, and the wish to evade it when it is painful or causes psychological conflict within or between group members.

Applying this formulation to my argument somewhat, it seems vital that we inspire writing that is linked to the primary task—on discussion boards, for example. Whereas the basic assumption mentality will likely lead to unstructured conflict, the deliberate challenges within the work done by the group engaged by the primary task is productive. Managed well, the writing produced—in blogs, in wikis, on discussion boards, and finally in summative submissions—is drained of any stereotypical ‘coldness’ by the structured conflict. In other words, with the scattered group, the implications are that clearly we want a primary task; but how do we avoid basic assumption mentality? Ironically, by stressing conflict itself.

What we must try to avoid is what Stokes (1994, *ibid*, p. 22) elaborates on in this passage:

When under the sway of a basic assumption, a group appears to be meeting as if for some hard-to-specify purpose upon which the members seem intently set. Group members lose their critical faculties and individual abilities, and the group as a whole has the appearance of having some ill-defined but passionately involving mission. Apparently trivial matters are discussed as if they are matters of life or death, which is how they may well feel to the members of the group, since the underlying anxieties are about psychological survival.

In this state of mind, the group seems to lose awareness of the passing of time, and is apparently willing to continue endlessly with trivial matters. On the other hand, there is little capacity to bear frustration, and quick solutions are favoured. In both cases, members have lost their capacity to stay in touch with reality and its demands. Other external realities are also ignored or denied; the group closes itself off from the outside world and retreats into paranoia. A questioning attitude is impossible; any who dare to do so are regarded as either foolish, mad or heretical. A new idea or formulation which might offer a way forward is likely to be too terrifying to consider because it involves questioning cherished assumptions, and loss of the familiar and predictable, which is felt to be potentially catastrophic.

Stokes (1994, *ibid*, p. 19) also cites Freud (1921), another pioneer in the field of group dynamics: ‘Essentially, Freud (1921) argued that the members of a group,

*particularly large groups such as crowds at political rallies, follow their leader because he or she personifies certain ideals of his/her own. The leader shows the group how to clarify and act on its goals.*’ Something similar occurs with the teacher and the learners in an online learning programme. To take further examples from the twinned worlds of training and psychoanalysis, Sebastian Foulkes (1964) argued for the necessity of a reliably consistent context, and Winnicott (1965) stated the case for the ‘spontaneous gesture.’ In terms of the latter, it is worth noting (parenthetically) the contribution that Winnicott (1965) made when he spoke of the true self and the false self in this same paper. Winnicott’s (1965) view was that the true self described a sense of self based on spontaneous authentic experience, whereas the false self was a defensive mechanism that protected the true self by disguising it. Winnicott (1965) predicted serious emotional problems for people who seemed unable to feel spontaneous, alive or real to themselves in any part of their lives, yet managed to put on a successful exhibition—or act—of being real. Feelings of emotional deadness and fakeness can result if the false self is overactive.

However, it is possible to wedge together the concepts of Foulkesian consistency and Winnicottian spontaneity: these emotional entities are not mutually exclusive, even if at first they seem paradoxical. Indeed, might we not say that reliability married with chaos (for which we should probably read creativity) is at the heart of education—online or face-to-face—and that a balance between the two might be the very best spur to student invention?

## Learner Anxiety

Anton Obholzer (1994, p. 171–172) writes: ‘All societies have an “education service”, in the broadest sense, to teach their members to use the tools they need to survive.’ If learners encounter conflict, however, it might be useful to examine what exactly they are learning. They are learning the rules of argumentative engagement; they are learning the skills of how to stave off boredom and ennui. For as Obholzer (1994) continues: ‘the education service is intended to shield us from the risk of going under. It is also, therefore, an institution that is supposed to cope with—whether by encouragement or denial—competition and rivalry. The debate about which nation has the best education system could be seen as a debate about who will survive and who will end up against the wall.’

Furthermore, Obholzer (1994) (a teacher/trainer himself) is convincing in his assertion that workplaces (and by extension online environments in which work is the main reason for meeting and engagement) are containers for elements of anxiety, and in his implication that we might draw something analogous from our work with learners. ‘Institutions,’ he writes, ‘often serve as containers for the unwanted or difficult-to-cope-with aspects of ourselves.’ (Here the writer uses ‘contain’ and its derivatives in the sense of the metabolizing of anxieties, to such an extent that feelings become bearable. When this happens, anxieties have been ‘contained’ (Bion 1961). Education, in addition to providing a specific need ‘through its primary task,

also deals constantly with fundamental human anxieties about life and death, or, in more psychoanalytic terms, about annihilation... the individual who is prey to these primitive anxieties seeks relief by projecting these anxieties into another' and it is 'this process of containment that eventually makes possible the maturational shift from the paranoid-schizoid position, which involves fragmentation and denial of reality, to the depressive position, where integration, thought and appropriate responses to reality are possible. In an analogous way, the institutions referred to above (including education) serve to contain these anxieties for society as a whole'. (170)

But how might this happen? In 'The Absence of 'E'' (Mathew 2011), I compared two distance learning programmes in a reflective, impressionistic manner, using (limited) qualitative data. One of these programmes had only internet contact; the other of these programmes had no internet contact (a prison setting, assessments sent by Royal Mail). I argued that the absence of the internet had very little negative impact on the learner experience: but the person facilitating the group most certainly received a negative impact. 'A tutor online might be subjected to the transmission of negative feelings (from the learners) that might have been dissipated more effectively via the internet, if this option had been available. Anxiety about assignments and exams, though directed primarily at the learners' respective tutors, were projected onto (and into) me, thanks to the absence of 'E'—the absence of an online provision... Perhaps an internet conduit of some description might have helped to contain the learners' anxieties, and by doing so, have improved the overall learning experience; just as likely, however, it would have complicated matters' (485–6).

Online and possibly 'protected' by a faux-identity, a learner is able to express opinions, respond to conflict, solve problems, make mistakes... and above all, endure anxiety. The psychoanalyst and organisational psychologist Jacques (1965, p. 246) puts the matter succinctly when he writes: 'Out of the working through of the depressive position, there is further strengthening of the capacity to accept and tolerate conflict and ambivalence. One's work need no longer be experienced as perfect... because inevitable imperfection is no longer felt as bitter persecuting failure. Out of this mature resignation comes... true serenity, serenity which transcends imperfection by accepting it.' In a roundabout way, conflict has led to peace!

## The Creation of Conflict

One of the problems, of course, with the deliberate creation of conflict in an educational setting is the setting itself—the educational setting—in and around which rules are often in place to stamp out corrosive behaviour. To reiterate what we have said above, the balance is delicate; or to put it another way, we face the paradox of challenging our learners up to a point and no further, via online discussion, robust (but fair) feedback to assessments that are deliberately provocative (they engage a learner's individual or collective sense of outrage or anger); or via the deliberate imposition of unexpected questions (unexpected, that is, by the learners). Alternatively, the educator might show a film that will spark debate and claim



(for the duration of the session) that he or she is very much in favour of its topic, which would normally be condemned as inappropriate; or the same might go for a controversial piece of text, music, art—broadly, anything that will challenge and engage the learner’s opinion. In addition, one might use the full potential of alternative identities and the deliberate mischief that they can cause, all (naturally) within the institution’s strict ethical guidelines, and (to be blunt about it) within one’s own professional common-sense. After all, if there are limits as to how far a *learner* is allowed to go (and if there are not, there should be), there are certainly limits to how far an educator should permit matters to continue once a boundary has been reached... and then breached. It should go without saying that we as educators will not tolerate cyberbullying, virtual crimes or any Munchausen-by-the-Internet complex.

The delicate nature involved in the creation of conflict suggests that one must—simultaneously—avoid any downward spiral of incivility. One is trying to use conflict as a driver for creative thought and philosophical or quasi-philosophical thinking (whatever the academic subject). A downward spiral of incivility—any situation where one party exhibits disrespectful uncivil behaviour and the opposing party responds in kind but in an escalated manner—will create an atmosphere of tit-for-tat gainsaying and an unproductive situation that has nowhere to go but downward, towards its disintegration—and possibly the disintegration of the group. Although we simultaneously both want and do not want friction among and with our learners *that is out of our control*, we very much hope for the creativity that comes with tension and strife *which we control on our learners’ behalf*.

## Final Thoughts

This chapter is largely a work of reflection, and combines work in psychoanalysis with work in the environment of online learning (across different subjects and university faculties). In theory, the subject being taught/studied should not affect the central notion of what this chapter presents. Where the matter might differ, one would think, is where the learner’s method of study is largely solitary. But not necessarily: if sufficient planning has gone into the course, the questions and challenges will be timed for impact in the programme, and of course there is scope for further ‘clashes’ when it is time for the educator to provide feedback. Overall, it is important for the learner to feel not only that he or she must contribute thoughts and opinions; he must also be in a position to justify the thoughts and opinions as well. Although it might seem that a necessary constituent of conflict is the construction of a group identity and dynamic, conflict within oneself is perfectly plausible. (Indeed, Freud (1921) built the industry of psychoanalysis that exists to this day on the premise that one is constantly at struggle with oneself, psychiatrically speaking.)

Perhaps the matter—the use of conflict and the acknowledgement of anxiety—comes down to something only a little more complicated than a war against boredom

in online learning. In education (as elsewhere) boredom is a turn-off, both for the learner and the educator; and if we propose that for many people the internet comes equipped with a 'soothing' factor, can we also extrapolate and suggest that for some learners the internet helps us to 'relax' into our studies, the Web acting like a soporific, an anaesthetic? Even if this is the case, the need for conflict is not abandoned. Indeed, the presence of conflict precedes the soothing, in a similar but less intense example of the post-trauma depression. The apposite inclusion of conflict might constitute one step towards avoiding the situation in which the learner simply 'goes through the motions' and reflects (perhaps truthfully, perhaps disingenuously, if he or she knows what the educator expects to read) in order to receive a respectable grade.

It is certainly easy to be lazy on the internet, if one is not guided properly by a competent distance learning facilitator. This facilitator might employ tactics which in most other settings would be perceived as bad manners or rudeness. For the sake of the exercise, he or she might seem not to listen; he might seem to read with a closed mind and not to want to countenance any opinions that are not shared with what he or she has already pronounced. Rather than using facts to support his opinions, he cherry-picks from his opinions and presents them *as* facts. He interrupts; or (on the contrary) shows the sort of hesitation that suggests that he does not know his material one iota. Alternatively, he reformulates his own opinions as he goes along. Worse still, he pretends never to have had his *earlier* opinion and doggedly insists that the learner has misread his previous contentions. He does not stay impartial: quite the opposite. He either hogs the limelight and posts too much or posts little but with messages that are cheeky or abrasive; routinely he laughs at his own jokes.

Chaperoned and helped by the right hands, the learner may find a rewarding, enriching educational experience that builds and consolidates, and which enables him/her to engage in social learning. We introduce conflict via techniques of the unexpected, by the pushing and redefining of barriers; but above all, we manage the conflict that we create. (For example, we might introduce a controversial topic and then seem to endorse it. We might ask our learners to adopt opposing viewpoints in a 'staged' debate.) Carefully managed conflict should ablate the existence of the perfectly natural human need for conflict that will arise in the absence of friction, or in an atmosphere of sterility. Individuals who join a group to meet their interpersonal needs require the same challenges and pedagogic perturbation as those who are actively motivated by task concerns. If we could think of conflict as a creative act, perhaps it would seem more attractive.

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