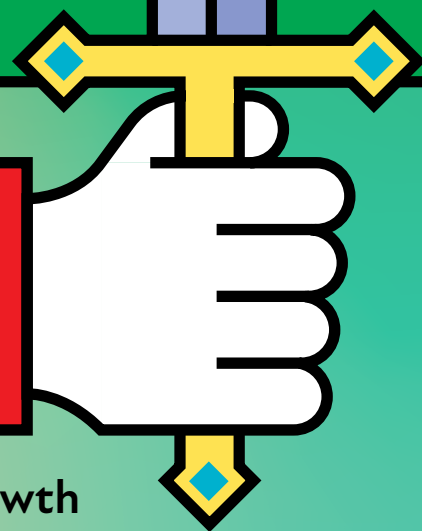


Pros and

Conflicts



Turn Classroom Disputes into Opportunities for Growth

by Brian Justice

Disagreements and difficult conversations are a part of everyday life and can take place everywhere, including the classroom. Whether the issue is between students or between a student and educator, differing opinions and personal experiences can spark conflict, frustration, and anger. However, instead of simply quashing a situation that is uncomfortable for everyone—including other students who witness the incident—educators can and should use conflict as an opportunity for learning, as well as personal and professional development.

“Working with students across a wide range of medical disciplines has shown me just how much pressure they’re under,” says Sandy Hyatt, PsyD, a trauma psychologist with LSU Health and the NOLA Trauma Recovery Center in New Orleans, Louisiana. “Balancing the intense demands of their studies with personal responsibilities can make them feel overwhelmed, especially in health care, where the stakes are high, and the pace is relentless.”

When conflict is handled effectively, it can drive discussions that improve critical thinking, communication skills, and

understanding. Developing tactics around conflict resolution is essential in creating a supportive and inclusive learning environment in which everyone feels heard, respected, and empowered.

All the Rage

Friction that occurs in the classroom does not have to be disruptive. Instead, it can serve as a valuable learning tool that fosters critical thinking, emotional intelligence, and stronger interpersonal skills. By equipping students with the tools required to identify conflict and strategies for counteracting it, educators can create an environment in which disagreements lead to growth rather than division. Educators can use these key strategies for turning discord into a constructive learning experience:

Understand conflict styles. Educators must understand and appreciate that people approach conflict in different ways, ranging from avoiding it entirely to facing it head on—and everything in between. Helping students identify their coping practices, and recognize those of their peers, empowers them to respond to difficult situations more effectively.¹

Encourage active listening and com-

munication. Active listening is not just hearing words. It means understanding a speaker’s intent and meaning. Techniques include maintaining eye contact, responding to nonverbal cues, asking open-ended questions, and paraphrasing responses to indicate one is listening to understand rather than to simply respond.²

Tiffany Santiago, a medical assistant with MultiCare Infectious Disease Specialists in Puyallup, Washington, learned to appreciate the importance of open communication through her work with interns and apprentices in a previous position. “I was up front and honest with everyone,” she remembers. “I told them, ‘I want you to be able to talk to me just like I am talking to you now, because I want you to be the best you can be,’ and that really helped keep the peace and manage conflict.”

Recognize power and cultural dynamics. “A big part is ensuring that everyone feels heard and respected,” says Dr. Hyatt. That includes creating an inclusive learning environment that respects and values diverse cultures and experiences.¹ “When everyone can express their perspectives without judgment or backlash, it leads to more constructive

and collaborative outcomes.”

Creating an inclusive learning environment has a real impact. “When people realize, ‘Wait, I was triggered. I had an emotional reaction. But I’m not going to get in trouble for this or lose my job or my place in the class,’ you can actually see their faces change,” says Bethany Friedlander, president and CEO of New Bridge, which provides free training for allied health careers, in Cleveland, Ohio. “That’s when and how we build trust.”

Integrate conflict-management lessons. If a discussion becomes a difficult conversation, prepare to use conflict resolution techniques such as collaboration, compromise, and problem-solving to help students navigate the discomfort. Establishing rules and norms and reinforcing them can also create a structured environment for constructive dialogue.³ Incorporating conflict-resolution training into the curriculum—covering topics such as managing anger, maintaining dignity in disagreements, and being assertive without becoming aggressive¹—further equips students with the skills to handle disputes with confidence.

“I always discuss my expectations and classroom rules and lead by example,”

says Shawnrae Isom, CCMA, the program director of the medical assistant program at Fortis College in Centerville, Ohio. “Acknowledging a concern or problem in a timely manner helps de-escalate and prevent recurring issues. Holding students accountable for their actions and rewarding improved behaviors, as well as treating adult learners with respect and dignity, helps prevent conflicts.”

“Be open to listening to students when they are ready to talk, but don’t force them into conversations they are not ready to have,” adds Amanda Beaman, CMA (AAMA), the medical assisting and phlebotomy department chair at Montgomery Community College in Troy, North Carolina. “If you have an open-door policy, students will feel comfortable coming to you, and then you can really address the situation and help diffuse it before it escalates.”

Hot to Go

Recognizing and addressing potential conflict before it escalates is a crucial skill for educators, particularly in the medical field, where teamwork and communication are essential. Awareness and adaptability are

key in identifying issues early so they can be resolved effectively.

Naturally, people may be uncomfortable and uncertain when it comes to navigating conflict. However, fostering a respectful, empathetic, and appreciative approach helps establish a safe environment for students and a growth mindset that will serve them well in class and later in workplaces. Challenges within classroom discussions may spark complex conversations, and they provide valuable opportunities for both educators and students to learn and develop. In fact, taking advantage of effective strategies to deal with conflict makes classrooms more inclusive and supportive.

“Just be aware and take a deep breath. Yeah, it’s going to be frustrating, and you’re going to think, ‘These people are adults!’ but they’re still people,” says Santiago. “You yourself have to be willing to learn from your students.”

A classroom environment in which conflict is used as an opportunity for growth requires intentional strategies, clear expectations, and open-mindedness. Doing so fosters mutual respect through dialogue that helps students develop critical conflict resolution skills that may not only prevent conflicts from escalating but perhaps keep them from happening in the first place. ♦

Trauma-Informed Practices

Emphasis on trauma-informed practices has been growing in educational settings. These strategies acknowledge and address the impact of trauma by creating supportive and secure environments. Prioritizing safety, relationship building, and student empowerment are trauma-sensitive practices that support a nurturing educational experience.⁴

“Conflicts can arise from personal stressors or misunderstandings in classrooms with diverse student populations and varying personal challenges,” says Sandy Hyatt, PsyD. “Trauma, whether visible or hidden, tends to intensify those situations.”

Trauma-informed practices include recognizing situations that may provoke strong emotional responses and responding to disruptive behaviors with compassion rather than judgment. Students who feel free to share thoughts and opinions develop emotional security, but if they exhibit signs of ongoing stress that manifests itself in challenging behaviors, they may need to be connected with a counselor, social worker, or psychologist.⁴

Adopting trauma-informed practices demands commitment, adds Friedlander. “When we decided to become a trauma-informed center, I went to the entire staff, and I said, ‘Your lives are going to change because we have to model this ourselves, eight hours a day, every day,’” she recalls. “That means we have to be emotionally regulated, which means we have to practice it with each other, and I really think that we are all the better for it.”

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