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"NOT My issue!!!": Teaching the Interpersonal Conflict Course

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Abstract: Students who enroll in communication courses to improve their conflict management abilities should be provided with both an understanding of, and skills pertaining to, interpersonal conflict across diverse contexts. In this article, we offer pedagogical guidance for teaching the Interpersonal Conflict course. With an emphasis on building communication skills usable in a variety of real-life situations and settings, this article includes discussion of necessary foundational concepts and applied content areas, sample application assignments, and relevant considerations for those teaching the course.

With ever-increasing frequency, communication students are expected by employers not only to possess knowledge about their field, but also to come equipped with the practical "soft skills" expected in the modern workplace. These skills include basic competency with interpersonal conflict: understanding it and effectively managing it in families, relationships, and at work. An Interpersonal Conflict (hereafter, IC) class should be offered to meet these student needs, particularly their abilities to develop the theoretical understanding of, and skills necessary to deal with, conflict on relational, family, and professional levels. Although not all universities have resources to offer an undergraduate course dedicated specifically to interpersonal conflict, those who do often draw students from across disciplines, including students majoring in Business, Psychology, Social Work, and Communication Studies. These students tend to enroll in an IC class in hopes of increasing their understanding and skills in dealing with conflict. Thus, there are incentives for students, instructors, and even departments to invest in offering this course.

In this article, we offer pedagogical suggestions for the IC course which hinge on the assumption that the primary purpose of this course is to provide students with solid groundings in IC theories and principles

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that can be simultaneously applied to allow them to build communication skills usable in a variety of real-life communication contexts, situations, and settings. These suggestions include (a) foundational theories/concepts to which every student should be introduced, (b) key content areas for application to which students should be exposed, (c) sample applied assignments, and (d) issues important to consider when teaching this type of theory/skills-based course.

Foundations

It is essential that students in a class dealing with IC be introduced to comprehensive definitions, formative lenses, and foundational theories. It is important to introduce and then frequently circle back to these elements throughout the course; this aids students in understanding how conflict functions at its most basic level, from which point they can engage in application to the different contexts in which IC occurs.

Foundational to any IC course, a clear *definition of interpersonal conflict* must be presented. While there are many definitions of conflict, understanding that IC in particular has key operational components enables students to identify if IC actually is present. Perhaps the most accepted and widely used definition considers IC to be "an expressed struggle between at least two interdependent parties who perceive incompatible goals, scarce resources, and interference from others in achieving goals" (Wilmot & Hocker, 2001, p. 13). We value this particular definition over alternative definitions because it highlights for students that IC involves a number of active dimensions that, when identified, help in assessing conflict and furthering resolution of it.

Once a clear definition is established, students must be taught the role of *perception* as it operates in any conflict scenario. Context is key; assessing conflict to determine an effective, appropriate resolution strategy in one instance may not transfer to other forms of relationships or settings. For example, perceived competence (i.e., effectiveness, appropriateness) can affect conflict behaviors and determine relational interactions in IC situations (Cupach, Canary, & Spitzberg, 2010). However, perceptions of competence may be altered by the history, experiences, culture, personality, and even mood of all individuals in the interaction (i.e., sender, receiver, bystanders).

It also is essential to cover key IC theories that have been, and continue to be, tested empirically in diverse settings. These theories allow students to assess and diagnose effective IC behaviors when they see them in action. Three foundational theories exist, and presenting several of these to students deepens their appreciation for not only the potential complexities of any IC situation, but also allows them different frames of reference for their own and others' worldviews on conflict. The first foundation is the *Explanatory Model of Interpersonal Conflict* (Cupach et al., 2010), which focuses on cyclical and patterned responses to conflict interactions. Students who can analyze a conflict based on the functions and flows covered in this model (e.g., distal context, proximal context, conflict interaction, proximal outcomes, distal outcomes) are able to competently assess their own and others' IC interactions. The second foundation is the *Lens Model of Conflict* (Brunswik, 1956), which plays an important role in making students aware of the cultural, gendered, and socioeconomic aspects inherent when engaging in IC. Viewing a conflict through the varied lenses possible in an IC, students pause to reflect on how their own and others' lenses affect the escalatory/de-escalatory patterns present. *General Systems Theory* (Monge, 1973; Monge & Contractor, 2003), a third foundation, provides a holistic IC account, based from which *Family Systems Theory* (Broderick, 1993; Galvin, Dickson, & Marrow, 2006) contextualizes

interpersonal and relational foci, a key element of the IC course. A family systems approach to IC, one that examines patterns and focuses on the roles of individuals in creating, maintaining, and resolving system conflicts, is especially intriguing for students, who already have experiences to apply to its key axioms. A family systems approach also allows students to explore conflict interactions at both macro- (e.g., group, society, family) and micro-levels (e.g., individual setting) and helps them become adept at identifying the chains, triggers, coalitions, and triangles evident in IC patterns.

Although we argue these theories/models should be taught in all IC classes, other theories/models can be added based on the course's focus (e.g., family, organizational, mediation-negotiation). Some of the more compelling additional theories for IC contexts include *Face-Negotiation Theory* (Oetzel & Ting-Toomey, 2003; Ting-Toomey & Kurogi, 1998), *Social Judgment Theory* (Sherif & Sherif, 1968; Sherif, Sherif, & Nebergall, 1965; Smith, 1967), and *Relational Power Theory* (Dunbar, 2004; Dunbar, Pippus, & Young, 2008; Wilmot & Hocker, 2001). All of these theories contribute to the assessment, understanding, and explanation of IC.

Content Areas

Because of the interdisciplinary and practical nature of this topic, students have an expectation that, upon completion of the course, they will have the ability to apply and pursue additional, more in-depth knowledge of specific content areas to differing areas of their life. It should be considered mandatory that content areas for an IC course include conflict goals, tactics, styles, and strategies.

It is imperative that an IC class provide students with an understanding of *conflict goals* (i.e., topic, relational, identity, process) and *power currencies* (i.e., resource control, communication skills, interpersonal linkages, expertise) as they operate in IC. This provision is because the initial step in any conflict is determining whether the appropriate tactic is to engage in or avoid IC in order to achieve goals; many students are not aware that IC can be strategic.

Once students determine which tactic to use, their choices of how to engage in conflict can be explained through Thomas and Kilmann's (2008) often cited *5-Style Model* which is based on the two conceptual dimensions of cooperativeness and assertiveness, resulting in five conflict styles: competing, compromising, collaborating, avoiding, and accommodating. Students taking an IC course should have not only a clear understanding of these five conflict styles, but also should be taught the benefits and detriments to using each style in particular contexts.

Beyond understanding these content areas as they exist across multiple case-settings and scenarios, students should consistently develop skills in class actually practicing them (i.e., identifying goals and decision-making regarding tactics, styles, and strategies). We emphasize frequent use of in-class exercises and simulations, as this type of engaged learning shows how these content areas can be lived and useful in managing differing forms of conflict contexts.

Often, students' practice and development of these conflict skills furthers their interest in conflict mediation and negotiation (processes which can also be introduced as content areas in the course). Although there typically will not be time to completely train students in mediation and negotiation skill sets, allowing students to engage in this form of experiential learning provides a preview of other options and establishes a strong applied content area to the IC course.

Applied Assignments

The IC class is unique in that it not only provides students with a solid grounding in IC theories, concepts, and strategies, but also it does so in a way conducive to applied assignments and activities. One assignment is the *Conflict Assessment Journal*, which has proven to be one of students' favorites. This assignment runs throughout the semester and as students learn new theories and concepts, they continually apply these theories and concepts to specific contexts from their own life (e.g., family, partner relationships, work) via online, interactive journaling. This assignment also entails responding to other classmates' online posts, a process resulting in deep discussions both online and in-class about how IC has been handled and if/how it could be handled more productively. The purpose of this journaling is to create a conflict-analysis mentality, which heightens students' awareness of their own and others' IC reactions and ultimately urges them to become competent IC choice-makers.

A second activity we find powerful for students' learning is the use of *Simulated Classroom Negotiations and Mediations*. After they have been taught the basic steps to negotiation and mediation processes, each student is assigned a role to enact from a case study, with the goal of resolving a dispute. These activities not only provide engaging and active ways to apply conflict theories and concepts, but they also meaningfully show conflict resolved in practical, real-world contexts; in other words, these activities "bring it all together."

We also like to use (in many of our interpersonal classes, in fact) what we call the *"Dear Ann" Assignment*. Although more detailed information can be found in Brule (2007), in this assignment small groups (although it can be modified to be individual students) are assigned an IC situation in which they are required to help the individual who wrote the "Dear Ann" letter. As "Ann," the advice each group gives the writer must be "educated advice" on how to resolve the conflict based on established IC research and theories. Groups must respond with explanations a layperson could understand: They assess the conflict, describe to the letter writer what is going on in the conflict, and then offer solutions for the resolution of the specific conflict or repetitive conflict interaction pattern(s) observed. After many years of implementing this assignment in varying educational settings, we find that every debriefing of this "Dear Ann" Assignment involves spirited discussions on the "best" approaches to resolving IC.

Issues to Consider

Teaching the IC class can be rewarding yet challenging. Therefore, there are several important issues to consider before undertaking the teaching of this class. First, because the area of conflict research is so vast in breadth and depth, it is important to establish ahead of time a clear direction as to which areas are introduced to students and at what level of complexity. There is a fine line that sometimes gets crossed without knowing it, one where you begin engaging undergraduate students in applied IC study and then, without realizing what is happening, the course has suddenly morphed into a graduate level course deep in theory and research. Different from other types of classes, teaching IC can be more about deciding what *not to* include (i.e., limiting the information presented in favor of focusing on practice/application) than deciding what you want to cover. Students do not need to know all the research on every theory and concept in order to understand and improve their own IC skills. A good guiding principle on how much and how deep to teach the subject matter in this course is to always strive for a way for students to apply each theory and concept in a way that is applicable to their own lives.

In addition, as with all interpersonal courses, this course will evoke some strong emotions and sensitive information from students as they begin to analyze and consider the impact their IC behaviors have had on their own families and relationships. Whereas these experiences can be valuable learning tools, often students want the type of advice that can easily evolve into a counseling situation. It is important to be clear at the beginning of the course that this is a sensitive topic which may cause strong feelings and regrets about their own conflict choices. Instructors teaching this course must continually encourage students to use the analysis of their past interactions as a means to improve their conflict skills and become more competent interpersonal communicators in the future.

Finally, the very nature of an IC class lends itself to the revelation of varying personalities within the class. It is important for instructors to develop a strong rapport with students in order to be able to be honest, reflective, and responsive regarding destructive and disconfirming conflict behaviors that need to be addressed, especially in the context of interpersonal relationships. Often students may want confirmation that some of their conflict choices are not destructive to relationships, even when those choices clearly lend themselves to disconfirming relational climates and defensiveness-raising communication interactions. Teaching a course focused entirely on IC requires instructors who are well versed in the subject, have a strong rapport with students, and are not afraid to challenge students to become better in their own conflict behaviors and relationships.

Conclusion

In this article, we explored teaching an in-depth and focused undergraduate interpersonal conflict course. Usually, this topic is taught as an advanced topics course or, even more likely, at the graduate level; despite this, faculty who undertake teaching this course at the undergraduate level will find that students embrace the topic enthusiastically and report later how it positively impacted their relationships at interpersonal, family, and organizational levels. Offering more classes on specific interpersonal concepts such as interpersonal conflict continues to showcase the relevance of the Communication Studies discipline to students' lives.

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