**CONFLICT RESOLUTION**

**SUPPORT STUDENTS AND PARTNERS: *ADDRESS CHALLENGES***

 

The literature on conflict resolution best practices is vast. In this guide, we’ve included some tips for handling the types of conflicts that are most likely to arise in community-engaged teaching: interpersonal and cross-cultural conflicts.[[1]](#footnote-1) There are also footnotes included throughout and an “additional resources” section to provide you with sources that offer in-depth information on different approaches.

**Conflict resolution, building authentic relationships, and sustainability:**

Conflict is natural and when it is resolved well it can lead to positive change, increased levels of trust, and, ultimately, stronger relationships. There are numerous approaches to conflict resolution, from pretty poor models like domination and avoidance, to models like mediation and compromise, often applied in long-standing conflicts or during tense negotiations. There is also an area of conflict resolution that focuses on collaboration and good communication best suited for close-knit relationships, and partnerships; this is the overarching approach we suggest faculty teaching community-engaged courses use.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Good conflict management is about sustainability since, as we work to create an environmentally, socially, and economically sustainable future, we must learn better ways to work together to manage resources and resolve conflicts. The most important global challenges, like climate change and economic inequality, require working together to create new models for a different future. Creating sustainable practices for conflict resolution, and modeling them for your students, can have a widespread positive effect on your community-engaged teaching, learning, and research.

Moreover, dealing with conflict in the service learning setting is often a great learning opportunity for faculty, students, and partners. Through partnership-based conflict resolution we can begin to unlearn negative, but dominant, social lessons about conflict—that power is an acceptable basis through which to resolve issues—and instead develop the use of understanding as a way to address issues.

**To practice collaborative conflict resolution in the community-engaged course (tips for faculty, partners, and students):**

* Treat conflict as natural.
* Teach and learn about complex ways that power, privilege, and difference can create or fuel conflict or enter into conflict resolution.
* Work to address problems instead of attacking or seeking to change people.
* Work together to establish and agree upon a specific protocol for conflict.
* If confrontation is necessary, intentionally prepare for it (e.g. by sharing a set of guidelines for the interaction or bringing in a third party to mediate).
* Consider the situation from the other person’s perspective.
* Create a learning community where you deal with small conflicts as a natural component of discussion, dialogue, and learning.
* Adopt popular education methods, such as those of Freire that use conflict as the basis for liberation and learning, in your teaching and community-based work[[3]](#footnote-3).
* Replace competition with collaboration in your community-engaged course, as competition fuels conflict. For example, ask whether you can change any assignments or projects set up as competitions and replace them with challenges teams work together to address?
* Work together to create a set of shared values that you will refer to when working to address conflict (e.g. that you support the peaceful expression and identification of conflict, value diversity, difference and individual and group acceptance of responsibility for conflict).

**Conflict resolution and cultural fluency[[4]](#footnote-4)**

*“Cultural fluency involves recognizing and acting respectfully from the knowledge that communication, ways of naming, framing, and taming conflict, approaches to meaning-making, and identities and roles vary across cultures.”* – Michelle LeBaron

Complications of working across culture:

* **Culture is complex and elastic**: knowing about a few cultural norms cannot predict individual behavior or response. People are unique and cultural generalizations never apply across the board.
* **Culture is always changing:** Even with a sense of the nuanced ways in which cultural norms might be relevant to a given circumstance, culture is always in flux as contexts and people change.
* **Culture is often subconscious:** Culture influences thoughts, actions, and the ways in which we define ourselves and understand the world in ways that we are unaware of and unable to fully comprehend.
* **Marginalized communities experience cultural oppression**: Historically oppressed and traditionally marginalized communities have specific experiences with culture-based oppression. Cultural oppression comes in different forms: sometimes it is marginalized groups being told by those from privileged groups that certain aspects of their culture are “wrong.” At other times, it takes the form of romanticization, often through commodification or consumption of aspects of marginalized cultures by those from outside of it without context, respect, or even understanding (e.g. naming professional sports teams after Native American tribes).

**Culture and conflict: how to prepare and respond**

*“Culture is always a factor in conflict, whether it plays a central role or influences it subtly and gently. For any conflict that touches us where it matters, where we make meaning and hold our identities, there is always a cultural component.”—Michelle LeBaron*

Given the aspects of culture outlined above, careful and close attention to resolving conflict across difference is essential in community-engaged teaching. Here are some concrete tips for resolving conflict in an intercultural context:

1. Learn about and provide resources to students on cross-cultural communication.[[5]](#footnote-5)

* Teach students about the ways that stereotypes, assumptions, and biases emerge from a society built on systematic oppression. For students from privileged groups working with those with less privilege, this requires deep reflection, reading, and dialogue on how to break free from harmful patterns of thought and behavior. But these differences also exist between students, so take this into account as well.
* Recognize that defining and addressing conflict is also cultural. For example, you and the partner or student might disagree about whether conflict arose at all or, in other cases, whether those involved should meet on their own or include an outside mediator in the discussion.
* Focus on building strong and authentic relationships (through pre-trainings, informal events, and by structuring the engagement so that students and partners develop independent relationships) since the best way to resolve conflict is through strong ties. Encourage experiences that help students and partners see each other as broadly as possible and connect across difference.
* Consider using narrative to resolve conflict, encouraging those involved to tell the story from one another’s perspective. When possible, document these stories and how you deal with conflict so as to incorporate it in future community-engaged teaching.[[6]](#footnote-6)

**Additional Resources**

Mayer, Bernard.*The Dynamics of Conflict: a Guide to Engagement and Intervention*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2013. <http://www.myilibrary.com?id=344615>.

Wilmot, William, and Joyce Hocker. *Interpersonal Conflict*. 8th edition. New York: McGraw-Hill Humanities/Social Sciences/Languages, 2010.

For readings, courses, and other resources on conflict resolution, see “Beyond Intractability,” an online resource center developed by the founders and co-directors of the University of Colorado Conflict Information Consortium. <http://www.beyondintractability.org/>.

For examples of how communities structure productive and collaborative approaches to conflict resolution, see “Community Boards: Building Community Through Conflict Resolution.” <http://communityboards.org/>.

For more information on transformative justice, see Nocella, Anthony, “An Overview of the History and Theory of Transformative Justice,” August 20, 2013, <http://www.heathwoodpress.com/overview-history-theory-transformative-justice/>.

Transformative justice is relevant in thinking through conflict resolution in the community engagement setting as the criminalization of marginalized communities continues to be a systemic issue, and as many of the traditional approaches to conflict resolution in the U.S. are rooted in our legal and criminal justice system.

1. While your students may be working in communities and on issues with long-standing and complex conflicts, dealing with these forms of conflict may require conflict resolution training and literature related to the specific problems and/or your content area. If this is the case, we suggest that you seek out additional resources to train students in the appropriate methods of thinking about and approaching conflict (e.g. conflict resolution in youth work). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See, for instance: Duckworth, C. L., & Kelley, C. D, *Conflict Resolution and the Scholarship of Engagement: Partnerships Transforming Conflict (London:* Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Top of Form

   Freire, Paulo, *Education for Critical Consciousness* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014).Bottom of Form [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The following two sections have been adapted from Michelle LeBaron, “Culture and Conflict,” in *Beyond Intractability*, July 2003, http://www.beyondintractability.org/essay/culture\_conflict [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See for instance: LeBaron, Michelle, "Culture and Conflict," *Beyond Intractability*, Eds. Guy Burgess and Heidi Burgess (Boulder, CO: Conflict Information Consortium July 2003).  [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. For more on narrative conflict resolution, see: “Introductory Bibliography.” *Center for the Study of Narrative and Conflict Resolution*. George Mason University. http://cncr.gmu.edu/introductory-bibliography.html. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)