

Managing Conflict in your Classroom

by Tom Maguire

Summary

Many teachers have to deal on a daily basis with conflict in their classrooms and yet they must also retain enough trust in order to lead their groups. Conflict cannot be avoided but teachers can learn to handle volatile situations while maintaining a positive leadership of the group.

So, how can they manage class relationships to achieve this?

The article offers tools to reach this win-win deal. The various strategies are included within two sections: building a relationship and dealing with conflicts. All the techniques are based on non-verbal communication and you will find them practical and immediately applicable to your classroom..

Introduction

Two children fight over an orange. In an effort to compromise, their mum splits the orange down the middle and gives half to each child. The first child discards the peel and eats the fruit. The second child discards the fruit and uses the peel to bake a cake.

What is the moral of this story? People argue a position: "I want the orange." The mother negotiates a deal by addressing that position: "Let's split the orange in half."

However to create the most effective deals we look past the positioning, to the underlying reasons: "I'd like some fruit or I need orange peel for my cake." Both children could have had more fruit and more orange peel from this approach.

Underneath each conflict there lies a relationship. Maintaining this personal link while dealing with the issues is what this article is about. You will learn how to keep your orange and eat it.

Building trust

In the above story the parent intervenes in the conflict and her kids accept the decision because she is the authority but also because her children trust her to make judgements that are fair.

In a similar way the teacher's first job is to establish a relationship of trust with the group so that she can later intervene credibly to defuse a conflict.

One of the most straightforward ways to create a trusting relationship within the classroom is to strive for optimal communication with the group. You promote a

positive relationship in this way because you are seen as caring for your class. Here are three techniques for achieving this :

Go visual.

In the early days of air transport when you arrived at your destination loudspeakers would bark out your airline, flight origin and the appropriate carousel on which to find luggage. Some people got the message but many were simply confused by such a cacophony of city and airline names plus carousel numbers. It wasn't until the same information began to be displayed visually that passenger confusion and anxiety subsided.

When presenting information in class make sure that it is available visually on the board as well as saying it. Naturally visual material added to auditory input doubles the sources of information available to students and thus leads to a fuller learning experience.

Some students already know something about what you are presenting, others don't, many process slowly, a few understand more quickly. Visual information allows you to cater for the different speeds at which your pupils process content so it keeps the group unified. More importantly the teacher is viewed as caring for individual needs.

Hand/Eye coordination.

Think back to the last time you watched the weather forecast on TV. Notice that when the meteorologists talked while facing the camera you looked at them but when they looked at the weather map you also looked at it. This is because the listener follows the speaker's eyes.

Now consider the classroom. You are speaking to the class and want them to look at a visual backup of what you are saying. If you speak while facing the group they will pay no attention to the information on the board but will look at you. To have them view the visuals you must lead your listeners' eyes to the board by looking at it yourself. It is even more effective when you coordinate your hand and eye movements to swing the learners' attention to the visual information. Be careful, unsynchronised hand/eye movements can confuse the focus of your audience and make you look incompetent. It is worthwhile practising this coordination in front of a mirror so that you can lead your class competently, reinforce their cohesion and appear to them as natural and credible.

Pause!

The most effective presentation tool is the pause. It affects both speakers and their audiences. The slow presenters who never pause will finally bore the listeners, especially if their voices are monotone; the fast-talking speakers will end up overloading their audience's brains, particularly when no visuals are used. To avoid both pitfalls a judicious pause while inputting information is required. It enables the onlookers to process the content and it allows presenters to inhale and keep their brain oxygenated.

Coupling a pause with a frozen hand gesture adds impact to this brief stopping point. The importance of this latter gesture was noticed at a conference where the speaker's words were being translated consecutively onstage by a person holding a hand mike while the main presenter used a lapel mike. It was observed that the audience paid more visual attention to the translator than to the guest speaker. The reason for this is that the hand mike kept the translator's arm in a static or frozen position which tends to mesmerise onlookers and hold their attention. So the pause accompanied by a frozen hand was adopted as a leading presentation tool.

Teachers can make use of this strategy to manage their classes, maintain attention and proactively avoid conflict. When presenting material make sure you pause often to allow your students to process your input. During the pause keep the hand still that you hold the chalk or pen in. When you start talking again you can accompany your speech with gestures. The formula for retaining audience attention, allowing yourself a breather and leading the group onwards is this: Speak > Pause + Frozen hand > Speak > Pause + Frozen hand > Speak... Practice of this basic technique will help you maintain a proactive leadership of the class managing conflict preventively.

Dealing with conflict

In the introductory story about the two children and the orange you will notice that, despite their confrontation, each child had a positive intention: one to obtain fruit; the other to get peel.

Before managing any conflict it is wise to remind yourself that 'All behaviour has a positive intention.' You may not be able to discern this intention at the outset but if you continue to act on this belief then your attitude will remain open-minded and your offers of negotiation will be accepted. The alternative option is to believe that

those in conflict with you are acting in bad faith. If you adopt this stance you will be seen as a judge and negotiation will turn into a polemic vicious circle and possibly escalate out of control. Your goal is to preserve the relationship while negotiating the issues.

With this in mind let's look at some practical techniques to manage a classroom conflict.

Separate the person from the problem.

Think back to when you last corrected a pile of your students' homework essays. They were mostly substandard grammatically, used simple vocabulary and poor phrasing and were altogether unimaginative. It is your duty to give back this negative feedback to the group. The question now is how to break this bad news to them while maintaining enough class empathy to lead them forward. The recommended non-verbal answer is:

*Have the essay papers in front of you and **look and point at them** when talking about the problematic homework; make **eye contact** with the group when your topic is neutral or positive.*

So the scene might go something like this:

(Teacher looks at group and greets them.)

(Looks & points at bundle.) I have corrected your essays and have them here.

PAUSE.

(Looks at group) With some exceptions I must say that in general

(Looks and points at essay bundle.) they were substandard in phrasing, vocabulary and grammar.

PAUSE.

(Looks at class.) Now we are going to do X,Y & Z to improve your essay writing.

By simply being aware of where you look and point you can communicate negative news to your class yet retain a positive rapport with them.

Use voice patterns systematically.

If we review the above situation from an auditory point of view remember that it is important to use your voice congruently to backup the visual and kinaesthetic non-verbals. This is achieved by using an appropriate voice tone which can range from credible to approachable. The credible voice is used to send a clear message; the approachable voice helps maintain a positive relationship with the group. Here's how to put this into practice :

To produce a credible voice you use a flat tone which descends at the end of the sentence. It sounds like the pilot's announcements to plane passengers. Notice that pilots use several pauses and do not rush their delivery. The credible voice sounds like a series of statements.

The approachable voice has a wavy tone which curls up at the end. It sounds similar to a question. The cabin crew announcements on an aircraft are made in this way to create a friendly and personable atmosphere.

Teachers can use the credible tone to send clear information, for example homework to be done, announcing exercises in class or for grammar instruction. In the above essay example the teacher would use a flat voice to backup the negative feedback on the group's writing.

On the other hand the approachable voice stimulates interaction as in class discussion or eliciting answers to the teacher's questions. In the example it would be appropriate when the teacher makes eye contact with the group.

Used systematically these voice patterns will help teachers avoid group confusion and disruption through mismanagement by leading and communicating their intentions clearly and separating issues from relationships.

Use specific descriptions.

This is particularly recommendable if a conflict arises between the teacher and a disruptive student during the course of a lesson. The error would be to enter a word battle with the student which just leads to light entertainment for the rest of the class and a leadership failure on the teacher's part. The recommended goal is to face up to the interruption, deal with it as fast as possible and get back to your teaching agenda.

For example you may think that a particular student's behaviour is causing disruption by him constantly talking to his neighbour. You focus attention on the pupil and say, "X, you should not be talking during class time." This may provoke the response, "I was not talking." The word battle has begun and it's about the interpretation of

whether or not X was talking. Avoid entering the contest by describing specifically what you observed and what you want: “Well, when you turn to your neighbour and open and close your mouth with sound coming out I consider it disruptive for learning, so refrain from doing that.” He may come back with, “I wasn't doing that!” Keep calm by breathing low in your abdomen, look at the group and reply, “I am saying that opening and closing your mouth while making a noise is disruptive for everyone's learning so avoid doing it.”

On another occasion you tick off a student for bad behaviour and he retorts “You are always picking on me!” Instead of becoming offended at this attack on your fairness ask, “Always?” Then leaving your pupil to ponder on the answer, move slightly out of your present location and draw the class attention back to the lesson content: “...turn to page 41 in the reader and look at chapter 6...” Physically moving out of your teaching position helps to induce group amnesia about the incident and create a new situation which you take advantage of to lead the class back into your agenda.

In order to defuse a volatile situation proactively instead of engaging in a battle of wits with argumentative students remember to pin down the exchange to specific responses. The aim of this is to avoid interpretations and remain as near the facts as possible. Some catch phrases which help to pinpoint a factual approach are: “How exactly?”, “What exactly?” and “How do you know?” Note that it is recommended to *avoid* asking “Why?” since that implies guilt and will evoke a defensive response.

Conclusion

To end, a short story: a little boy was playing quietly in his room with some new toys. His mother was in the kitchen preparing lunch. Suddenly there was an almighty crash as some plates slipped out of mother's grasp and clattered to the floor, smashing into smithereens. On hearing the resounding noise the startled little boy immediately left his toys and ran into the kitchen shouting, “It wasn't me! It wasn't me!” The child had been managed by his parents through guilt and so felt that every accident or catastrophe was his fault.

In the past the teacher was often a figure of authority who controlled the class by playing on feelings of guilt or threatening pupils into submission. As a short-term discipline this sort of sentimental blackmail will work quite adequately. However, in the long run these methods will erode the very self-respect educators propose to install in their pupils. The power to impose your will by threat or shame is, in the end, not useful for educating responsible citizens. We are obliged to find and act out new patterns of discipline which will lead to self-control and not simply obedience.

Instead of using the influence of power we need to use the power of influence. We can do this through positive management. Its aim is to give teachers the resources they need to maintain the balance between controlling pupils' behaviour and fostering the growth of positive human values.

This approach will also have wider-reaching results. As pupils experience their teacher using influence instead of power they too will learn how to relate positively to others. The students will spread the same approach and so begin to create their own virtuous cycle of relationships based on positive management. In this way when we use non verbal influence as the foundation for our classroom relationships we are also teaching our students how to understand and interact positively with others. This is surely a basic goal of education.

Recommended reading:

Grinder, M. (2007) The Elusive Obvious, Grinder & Associates, Battle Ground, WA, USA. (Available from amazon.es)

Biodata

Tom Maguire has degrees in English (Glasgow), French (Montpellier, France) and Philology (Santiago de Compostela). He has 40 years experience in TEFL at university and high school levels in France and Spain. He has participated in the teacher training MA at the Ramón Llull University lecturing in Class Management, and presently in the MA at the UPF. He is a Master Practitioner in Neuro-linguistic Programming (Nlp) and is certified in Group Dynamics by Michael Grinder, expert in group mastery.