

Conflict Resolution Across the Curriculum

by Gary L. Flory

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A conflict resolution professor, tongue in cheek, once told her students she would use a different process to assess what they learned in the course. Every student would be given an incomplete in the course for five years. After five years the professor would locate every student and inquire of the student's employer, co-workers, spouse, graduate professors, neighbors, and others how the former student was handling conflict-both as a party and as a third-party and base the assessment on what was learned during this inquiry. The professor's suggestion was impractical, since most students have at least some interest in graduating. Yet the aspiration is valid. Effective education in conflict resolution ought to prepare students to analyze and handle conflict constructively in whatever vocation or life setting they happen to find themselves.

This concept is neither new nor unique. Most every discipline can and does make the case that its true merit comes not in the course work itself, but rather in how the course influences the way students think, act, and live after the course is finished. The challenge rests in how education goes about preparing students for this task.

English departments have been more creative than much of higher education in this regard. For the past 30 years some institutions of higher education have been implementing, and in some cases institutionalizing, *-Writing (or Language) Across the Curriculum* programs. The justification for *Writing Across the Curriculum* programs is that writing is so critical to virtually every aspect of life

that its instruction should not be limited to English or writing classes, but rather it should be taught in other disciplines as well. Students learn to write better, the theory goes, if they learn to write within the context of their major area of interest.'

It is the underlying premise of this article that a similar case can and should be made for conflict resolution. Whatever their vocations or areas of interest, conflict of some kind will, at one time or another, seriously impact the lives of virtually every student. Therefore, colleges and universities need to help students learn to respond to conflict constructively for the sake of their professional growth, if not also for their personal and social growth. Where better, then, can schools teach about conflict than within the context of students' major areas of interest?

Developing the Model

The model described in this article is based on the experience of a small liberal arts college which began its foray into the field of conflict resolution with no clear vision of what a conflict resolution program ought to be about, other than the rather nebulous but noble objective of helping as many students as possible better understand conflict and its resolution.

As the program design took shape, several guiding principles surfaced:

1) The program would not be centered around a major or minor in conflict resolution. To develop a program without a major or minor was probably the most critical early decision in the process. There is a natural inclination to want to develop a series of courses that represents the core of what the discipline is about, and that may lead to a major. But many colleges and universities are currently reducing majors, so to be able to develop a viable program without adding a

new major was an option that was particularly attractive, to the administration.

Aside from the administrative issue, the decision not to create a major may even be appropriate from the perspective of the discipline itself. As most educators and professionals in the field know, there is not an abundance of jobs for newly minted conflict resolution majors. Yet it is also apparent that some knowledge of conflict resolution may be useful to majors in other disciplines as they look for work in those vocations for which they were trained.

In addition, it did not seem important to create a major even for those students who might want to attend graduate school in conflict resolution. One characteristic of the field that seems clear is the rather astounding lack of uniformity in undergraduate conflict resolution programs. Students desiring to take a graduate degree in conflict resolution may well have to "start over" in graduate school in any event.

Finally, the option of a student-developed interdisciplinary major allows those students so inclined to still be able to focus on conflict resolution (often in conjunction with something else) if they are really determined to do so.

2) An effort would be made to cross-reference all conflict resolution courses in other departments and to obtain general education designation where possible. Since the merit of taking conflict resolution courses may not always be apparent to students who may have little or no knowledge about conflict resolution, a mechanism must exist to take the courses to the students. And this goal is expedited if the courses have some matriculation value to the students. This can be accomplished by a) cross-referencing the courses, which allows students to use a related conflict resolution course as an elective in their own major, or b) obtaining a designation

for the course which allows it to satisfy some general education requirement. In either of these events, the objective is to export conflict resolution into other disciplines and departments. Infiltrating other departments with conflict resolution becomes an objective of the program. It is not sufficient to simply create a program and wait for students to take notice.

3) Professors in other disciplines would be encouraged to co-teach with a conflict resolution instructor. Any program that moves among various departments and disciplines cannot survive without the support of faculty. This is especially true with this model when one measure of the program hinges on the process of conflict resolution interacting with the content of other disciplines. Faculty is needed to help relate to and understand that content - and to help integrate the conflict resolution components into the context of the other discipline.

Faculty "buy-in" is a must, and active participation by faculty is one way to encourage that buy-in. In order to facilitate participation, the administration in this model agreed to free up teaching time, up to one course per semester, for any faculty member who would team teach a course in conflict resolution that was cross-referenced in that faculty member's department. Thus no faculty member would need to teach an overload to participate.

A second rationale for faculty participation is that a good understanding of conflict may be just as important for faculty as for students. The purpose of conflict resolution across the curriculum is to prepare students (or other persons) to deal with conflict in whatever setting they may find themselves. Well, college teaching is one of those settings.

4) The program must be flexible. Without a history or track record to guide the program -direction, it seemed likely that there would be at least some element of trial and error in program development. New

opportunities arise to cooperate with other departments. Faculty, who may not have envisioned conflict resolution in their department at one time, may begin to see how it can be useful. As with any new program) one must be open to recognizing what appears to be workable, and to be able to adjust to take advantage of those opportunities.

Experiencing and Assessing the Model

Just as students might best be assessed five years or so after they take a course, academic programs also ought to be assessed after enough time has elapsed to see the longer-term effect of the program on students. There has not yet been a formal assessment of this program. But, preliminary indications can be noted.

Most importantly, students do choose to enroll in conflict resolution courses. General education credit, for those courses for which this designation has been obtained, appears to be a significant incentive for student enrollment. But a substantial number of students also report that they are simply interested in taking a course on conflict, and being able to use a course as an elective in their major lets them justify what they would like to do anyway.

Faculty support for and involvement in the program has been mixed. Philosophical support for the program has been strong, as has been faculty encouragement for their student advisees to take conflict resolution courses. In addition, there has been surprisingly good cooperation in cross-referencing, primarily because it adds ore breadth to departmental offerings without additional staffing load.

But in spite of incentives for faculty to participate in team teaching, and in spite of statements by many faculty that they would look forward to jointly working on a course in conflict resolution, faculty are still reluctant to actually move forward with this level of

involvement. The rationale for this reluctance appears to be twofold. First, developing a new course, particularly one in which there is likely no comprehensive published text, is time consuming. For most professors there is not an abundance of free time, and a more familiar routine takes less time and energy. In addition, even though an adjunct would be provided to free up a time slot to team teach, many professors prefer not to turn a course over to an adjunct. In a small college, professors become somewhat protective of the way their own courses are taught.

Keeping the program flexible has been critically important. Without the need to develop a major, courses could be developed and added to the curriculum with some deliberation as conversations with other departments about cross-referencing matured. Collaboration for developing courses with the business department moved rather quickly, while collaboration with the education department, which would seem to be a natural for conflict resolution, has been problematic. Education majors have so many state requirements for teacher certification that there simply has not been space to add additional courses. The plan in progress with the education department is to find ways to clear two or three week blocks within existing courses so that shorter conflict resolution components can be introduced. This approach would not show conflict resolution on the student's transcript, but the students would have been exposed to good conflict resolution theory and skills.

Not every department on campus has a conflict resolution connection, but interest has increased as current courses appear to be successful. Environmental science, for example, aware of the significant role public policy mediation has played in the environmental arena, has suggested the possibility of adding an environmental conflict resolution course as a requirement for its-major. In the English department, early collaboration has begun on developing a course

studying the way in which American literature portrays conflict and its resolution.

A flexible conflict resolution program has also shown rather extraordinary possibilities for adult education within the wider community - opportunities for the college to interact with local industry and business as well as opportunities to extend the influence of conflict resolution education. Courses have been developed, for example, for groups as varied as management in the home office of an insurance company to floor nurses in a local nursing home.

Conclusions

After four years of trial and error, the objective of infiltrating other academic departments with good conflict resolution theory and skills shows some signs of working. Support and encouragement from faculty, administration, and students for conflict resolution across the curriculum has been positive and even enthusiastic in principle. However, faculty willingness to become personally involved in teaching conflict resolution, which may be critical to the ongoing success of the program, is an area that still needs attention.

Ultimately, conflict resolution across the curriculum suggests that good conflict resolution skills need broader integration into the culture in which we live. Conflict resolution must not simply be the private domain of specialists. It must be a way in which everyone learns to solve problems. It must become a part of every discipline just as good writing is a part of every discipline.

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References

1 See, for example, S. Weinberg, "Writing Across the Curriculum," *The Chronicle of Higher Education* B2 (June 16, 1993).

2 This model is based on the experience of McPherson College in Kansas. The introduction of this model at McPherson was clearly expedited by the college affiliation with an historic peace church, and the accompanying philosophical foundation of belief that all students would be well-served by being exposed to good conflict resolution.

3 As anecdotal evidence: A student who took a course in *Interpersonal Conflict Resolution*, cross-referenced in psychology, looked me up at a recent homecoming. He had obtained a job with the Immigration and Naturalization Service. An applicant with a major in conflict resolution may not have qualified for the job, but this student reported that during the interview process the course in conflict resolution was the one course listed on his transcript that was mentioned by the interviewer. This student was convinced that having taken the course in conflict resolution was one factor in his obtaining the job. And he has used those conflict resolution skills on the job.

4 See, for example, the description of conflict resolution programs found in the *Global Directory of Peace Studies Programs, 1995-96 Edition* (Fairfax, VA: Consortium on Peace Research, Education and Development, c/o Institute for Conflict Analysis and Resolution, George Mason University, 1996).

5 Business department involvement was facilitated by recently completed in-depth conversations with major employers who recruit senior business majors on campus. Two conclusions resulted from those conversations. Most students come to their first job with good content skills, that is, accountants will know how to do their accounting work. But employees often have little experience in

solving the work-related problems that will inevitably arise. Thus the business department was eager to cross-reference courses such as *Organizational Conflict and Negotiations*, and business advisors are encouraging their students to enroll in those courses.

6 Behavior Management or *Classroom Management*, for example, would be prime courses for conflict resolution to be introduced as one segment of the larger course.