

# CONFLICT MANAGEMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION REPORT

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## **Role Plays and Congruence: Some Suggested Teaching Principles**

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*This summer Wayne State University's Mediating Theory and Democratic Systems Program offered a one-day workshop on Teaching Conflict Management in Academia. Barry Goldman, the author of this piece, was one of the program presenters. He graciously agreed to share some of his thought with CMHER readers.*

**I** do a lot of my teaching by the seat of my pants. I like it that way. But it creates a disconnect between what I do and what I tell my students to do.

What follows is a list of statements that would, if they were put into practice, increase the congruence between what I teach and the way I teach it and, I think, increase the effectiveness of my teaching. The list grew out of a talk I gave on the use of role-plays in teaching negotiation. I'd be interested in readers' comments.

### **Match the role play to the target concept**

**T**here are plenty of fine role plays out there. This site has links to sources for many of them. But the effect of even the best scripts can be diluted to zero if they aren't assigned when the class is dealing with the appropriate idea. Don't waste your great logrolling script on the night your lecture was on gender and culture.

This means you will have to read a lot of role plays. There is no help for that. You can't teach students to do their homework unless you do yours.

### **Choose the technique with care.**

**R**ole plays can be done privately by students in pairs or small groups or they can be performed by one group with the rest of the class observing (the fishbowl technique). The roles in the fishbowl can be fixed or they can change. Roles can be assigned to volunteers, they can be assigned by an instructor with a particular pedagogical agenda or they can be randomized. Or they could appear to be selected by one

of these methods when in fact they are selected by another. And role plays don't have to come from role play books. They can come from films or literature, from the news or from real life.

Varying the presentation technique keeps the class interesting, but it is also good pedagogy in a way that is analogous to varying negotiation technique. A teacher with one presentation is like a pitcher with one pitch or a negotiator with one gimmick. Pretty soon they get "solved".

## **Take Your Students Where You Find Them**

I am the instructor. I've been doing this for a long time. I know what I want to cover and what I consider inessential. It's easy to decide that I know best and I don't need to listen to my students.

But students have ideas about what they want to know, what they need to work on, what interests them. You won't find out unless you ask. Then you can let them design role plays that deal with issues that matter to them or that employ techniques they have encountered in real life. Meaningful problems are better teachers than teachers. You can't teach students to listen unless you listen.

## **Use the Least Intrusive Intervention**

The whole idea of negotiation role plays is that they provide students an opportunity to experiment in a situation where there aren't real dollars riding on the outcomes. If the instructor has chosen the script, assigned the roles and selected the technique with an eye toward matching the target concept s/he can relax and "let the problem be their teacher".

The first rule of intervention is: Don't.

One way to note things for the rest of the class without interrupting the players in the fishbowl is to use a flip chart that the players can't see. No doubt there are much more expensive, computer-assisted ways to do this but a flip-chart will do.

If it is necessary to intervene while a role play is going on there are several ways to do it. One is to sneak over to the player who needs it and whisper. One level up from the whisper is to slip into the fishbowl as if you were a party or a co-mediator and slip out again.

At the next level up the scale of intrusiveness you can ask the players to freeze in role while the rest of the class processes what has been happening. And at the most intrusive level you can stop the role play, bring the players out of role, discuss and return to role.

The goal ought to be to use the least intrusive intervention that will accomplish the job. This requires that the instructor be aware of the different possible levels of intrusiveness, have a clear idea of which one is appropriate under the circumstances, and have a clear idea of exactly what constitutes "the job".

Another point worth making is that it is not only the instructor who can take the role of intervenor. Coaches or "consultants" can drop into the fishbowl too.

## **Ask Leading Questions and Let Them Talk**

**T**elling people things is not an effective way of getting them to learn them. People learn best from what they themselves do, think and say. Therefore, in debriefing an exercise, let the players explain what they learned.

If it's necessary to tell them something, tell them in a way that they are likely to hear you. Criticism gets ignored. Phony flattery is eventually discounted. But by asking questions and working together toward answers you can "let them have your way". You can lead and teach without coercion.

It may also be helpful to debrief in expanding groups. First the small group debriefs itself. Then it brings its conclusions to the larger group. This gives students more confidence in what they have to say which in turn increases voluntary participation and reduces the teeth-pulling feature of many debriefings.

## **Monitor Your non-verbals**

**P**ay attention to those body language leaks. Model the behavior. You can't teach students to do it unless you do it.

## **Be Mindful**

**I**t's all about mindfulness. It's all about paying attention. Effective, engaging, exciting classes don't just happen. And subject-matter expertise is only necessary, not sufficient to make them happen. Care and attention to the process is essential. Just as it is in any dispute resolution method.

**Save the little clear plastic name tag sleeves you get at conferences and use them to identify your role play characters.**

Every article like this should have at least one actual, practical piece of advice. That's it for this one.

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