



Making the Case for Infusing Conflict Resolution into the High School Classroom and Curriculum

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To say the least, implementing comprehensive conflict resolution programs is a challenging proposition in high school settings. Teaching conflict resolution as a separate course or as weekly lessons in an already existing course doesn't garner much enthusiasm from high school teachers. All too often, staff will say, "There's not enough time. There's already too much content to cover. The school day is already overscheduled."

Yet, the goals of high school conflict resolution programs reflect the same concerns of most high school educators. How do we personalize learning so that every student can be successful? How do we personalize large high schools so that all students feel safe and have a place where they belong? How do we go about creating more caring and respectful classrooms? And finally, how can we provide students with the tools and skills to deal effectively with interpersonal conflict and cultural differences?

Restructuring high schools to meet all of these concerns will take decades. In the meantime, infusing conflict resolution into the standard curriculum and daily life in the classroom can involve staff and students in creating better learning communities right now. In its blueprint for reforming high schools called *Breaking Ranks*, the National Association of Secondary School Principals, recommends changes in curriculum, instructional strategies, and school climate that parallel "best practices" in conflict resolution education. To be specific, *Breaking Ranks* offers these recommendations:

- The content of the curriculum will connect itself to real-life applications of knowledge and skills to help students link what they're learning to how they live.
- Conflict resolution education places students' feelings, thinking, and experiences at the center of the curriculum with the expectation of applying what you learn to real life.
- Teachers will use a variety of strategies that engage students and identify and accommodate individual learning styles. High schools will acknowledge multiple talents and ways of learning to help students achieve meaningful success.
- Conflict resolution education incorporates teaching- learning strategies

that are cooperative and experiential, integrating multiple intelligences and cognitive, emotional, and social aspects of learning.

- Teachers will teach in ways that help students to develop into competent problem solvers and critical thinkers.
- Conflict resolution education emphasizes problem analysis, problem solving, and responsible decision making.
- Teachers will integrate assessment into instruction so that it becomes part of the learning process itself.
- Experienced-based reflection, feedback, and assessment are essential for developing social and emotional competencies; these processes are intentional components of most conflict resolution activities.
- The curriculum will expose students to a rich array of view points and perspectives.

Effective negotiation and mediation provide practice in perspective taking and help students appreciate the importance of multiple points of view and more than one solution.

- Teachers will convey a sense of caring to their students so they feel that their teachers share a stake in their learning.
- Conflict resolution education encourages more caring relationships in the classroom through the practice of non-judgmental communication, through activities where students share their personal stories, and by shifting the focus to students speaking and teachers listening.
- Teachers will be adept at acting as coaches and facilitators of learning to promote more active involvement of students in their own learning.
- Putting conflict resolution into daily practice provides the opportunity for students and teachers to negotiate what to learn it and how to learn it, encouraging more personal responsibility for learning.
- High schools will advocate and model a set of core values essential in a democratic and civil society.
- Conflict resolution involves the practice of participation skills vital to democratic communities, from exercising voice and choice in the classroom to practicing non-adversarial dialogue and interest based problem solving.

Five Approaches for Infusing Conflict Resolution into the Classroom and the Curriculum

Infusion gives teachers the flexibility to create the best fit for integrating conflict resolution education in their classrooms. Teachers are no less idiosyncratic than their students, with varying passions and comfort zones. We need to invite teachers to try infusion where they perceive the need to be greatest and where their personal interests are the strongest. Teachers can infuse conflict resolution concepts and skills as a way of deepening students' engagement with the subject matter in the course. Infusion can also mean introducing instructional strategies that promote cooperation, active listening, and collaborative problem solving. And infusion can mean developing daily and weekly routines that build a caring learning community and model a negotiated approach to classroom management. This article describes five infusion approaches that teachers can use.

1. Infusing Conflict Resolution Concepts

Where does this work best?

English, Social Studies, and Science

A sampling of key concepts: Conflict Analysis; Win-Win; Conflict Styles; Conflict Escalation; Positions and Interests; Dynamics of Power

In this approach the teacher explicitly integrates conflict resolution concepts into academic subject areas so that students are able to:

- gain a richer, more complex understanding of the people and problems they are studying.
- connect their own emotions and experiences to the characters and events that they read about and examine the behaviors of others as a bridge to building greater personal insight into their own behavior
- learn a systematic way of thinking about conflict and cooperation using historical, current, or fictional characters and events

For example, in a world history course, students can analyze the escalation of an international conflict and then look for parallel situations in the world today. In a literature class, students might discuss the internal and external conflicts that a character experiences in a particular situation and then reflect on the internal and external conflicts that they might experience in a similar situation.

Starting Points:

Identify the concepts you want to teach and look for specific topics, events, or literature where you want students to work with the concept. You might want to first teach the interpersonal application of the concept and then apply the concept to your course content or choose to teach the concept in the context of your course content, and then relate the concept to students' own experiences. The decision you make will depend on your students' familiarity and comfort with the concept.

An examination of international responses to conflict might begin by first exploring interpersonal conflict styles and then comparing interpersonal conflict styles to global responses to conflict. On the other hand, you might want to explore processes of peacemaking that students see, hear, and read about on TV, on the radio, and in print media before reflecting on the peacemaking skills they use in their own lives.

2. Infusing Conflict Resolution Skills and Processes

Where does it work best? Any course in which students are developing and refining communication and problem solving skills

A sampling of skills: Active Listening; Anger Management; I-Messages; Negotiation; Mediation

Infusing conflict resolution skills, such as active listening and problem solving, gives students a chance to practice their skills in new and varied contexts. For example, might explore how they deal with their anger in tense situations and then look at how anger plays a role in how disputing leaders respond to each other in an international conflict. The first chapter in Jimmy Carter's book, *Talking Peace*, provides an excellent opportunity for students to examine how personal anger affected the Camp David Peace Conference (This example is taken from *Dialogue: Turning Controversy into Community*, 1997, ESR). Or students might write "I-Messages" the might have changed relationships for characters from Sandra Cisnaro's book, *The House on Mango Street*. The emphasis here is identifying places in your curriculum where conflict resolution skills enable students to demonstrate a deeper understanding of course content.

Starting Points:

Identify skills you want students to practice in your course. You might want to teach the interpersonal skill and then apply the skill to your course content. Or you might want to first teach the skill in the context of your subject matter content, and then apply the skill to students' own interpersonal experiences. The decision you make will depend on your students' familiarity and comfort with the skill.

For example, negotiation may be an entirely new way of thinking about problem solving. Practicing an informal group negotiation first can set the stage for participating in a multi-party negotiation involving groups and governments who have a stake in managing and preserving rainforest resources. On the other hand, some skills are more comfortable to first practice outside of a student's personal experience. Students might explore how emotions drive the behaviors of characters in "The Raisin in the Sun", before reflecting on their own feelings and behaviors in similar situations.

3. Infusing Thematic Units and Extended Lessons that explore conflict and cooperation in the larger world

Where does this work best? English, Social Studies, and Science

A sampling of units of study: Conflict and Cooperation in the Middle East; War and Peace in Ancient Greece and the 20th Century; The Struggle for Civil Rights; Trash Conflicts: Resource and Waste Management; Non-Violence: Voices of Peacemakers Who Made a Difference.

Think about appropriate opportunities for developing thematic units and in depth lessons that take a more comprehensive and complex look at how conflict shapes the past and the world students live in right now. Creating a special two or three week unit of study gives you a chance to can integrate interpersonal conflict resolution lessons with a topic or issue that lends itself to a rigorous analysis and discussion of the roles that conflict and violence,

cooperation and peacemaking play in the human experience.

You may discover that you already teach a unit that provides a natural match between the subject matter and conflict resolution. For example, a civil rights unit in a US history course would provide an excellent opportunity to explore events and relationships through a conflict resolution lens, integrating activities that focus on prejudice and discrimination, position and interests, conflict styles, and anger management.

Starting Points:

- Brainstorm a list of content topics from throughout your course syllabus that could be synthesized into a coherent thematic unit that has a conflict and cooperation focus.
Then brainstorm a specific list of case studies, books, readings, speakers, projects, and videos that you could use to explore this theme.
- Create a set of "big idea" questions that could help frame the unit you create. Here are some examples: How does the quality of communication affect the behavior of conflicting individuals, groups and nations? How do attitudes about violence, aggression, and cooperation influence decisions that individuals and groups make? How do emotions drive behavior? What conditions and attitudes make negotiation between conflicting groups possible? What blocks effective negotiation? How and when can peacemaking strategies be used to de-escalate local and global conflicts? What understandings enable people with deep religious, cultural, and political differences to talk to one another and work toward effective change and resolution of differences.

4. Infusing Instructional Strategies that promote the peaceable classroom

Where does this work? Any course

A sampling of key strategies: Pair-Shares; Micro Labs; Concentric Circles; Small Group Rotation Stations; Role Plays; Brainstorming and Webbing; Cooperative Groups

The instructional strategies that are a familiar part of conflict resolution education help build a peaceable classroom and encourage student participation by:

- involving students in a cooperative process;
- creating opportunities for lively interaction between students;
- establishing an atmosphere where students are free to verbalize their feelings and ideas non-judgmentally;
- demonstrating respect for different opinions and perspectives
- linking personal story and experience to abstract concepts
- using a multi-sensory approach or incorporating multiple intelligences in ways that encourage students to appreciate various learning strengths that different individuals bring to the group

Any of the strategies used in conflict resolution education can be used to teach any other subject matter. For example, in a micro lab students work in small groups of three to four. Then, one at a time, students speak on a subject for about two minutes. While one student is speaking, others in the group are listening carefully but giving no verbal responses. The teacher signals when two minutes are over, and the next student in the group speaks. This strategy can be used across subject areas:

- In Math: Each micro lab group can be given a complex problem and share how they would go about solving it.
- Social Studies: Using a controversial issue, students can explore and express their own opinions on the issue.
- Science: Each student can identify what s/he thinks is the most pressing environmental issue in their community, discuss how this issue impacts them, and suggest possible solutions.
- English: Using a literary excerpt, each of four students in the micro lab might take on the role of different character, each sharing their point of view about a character, their role in the conflictual situation, the decision they would make about what to do.

Starting Points:

Decide the instructional strategies you want to use in a particular unit. Then decide whether you want to use the strategy to introduce a topic, make connections between the content and students own experience, to explore a topic in greater depth, to review, to apply learning to a new situation, or assess what students have learned. Create the activity, developing materials and questions that are content specific.

5. Infusing Peaceable Classroom Practices into daily and weekly routines

Where does this work? Any course

A sampling of peaceable practices: Making Classroom Agreements, Using Class Meetings for Group Problem Solving; Using gatherings and Closings that Build Group Cohesion; Negotiating Classroom Projects; Homework Assignments, and Assessment Options

Modeling is the first and most important way we learn. A teacher's commitment to personally practice conflict resolution skills in interactions with students sends them a powerful message that these skills really matter. Think about how you can structure your classroom routines and lesson plans in ways that promote the peaceable classroom and nurture the spirit of conflict resolution everyday. The practices presented here can help build a greater sense of community and mutual respect and communicate to students that emotional and social learning are valued components of the teaching-learning process.

1. Make classroom agreements in the beginning of the year
2. Include gatherings and closing activities as part of your weekly schedule like: go-rounds where students share their thoughts and feelings about a particular issue or a pair-share where students respond to a provocative question linked to what they are studying. These kinds of short activities at the beginning or end of a class create a way for students to personally connect as a group, building a sense of community that sets the stage for working together with a shared purpose.
3. For every lesson you teach, identify both academic goals and skills (WHAT is to be learned) and social goals and skills (HOW students work together to learn it and what they can do to support each others' learning).
4. Take time out to solicit student feedback about how they are experiencing what's going on in the classroom. Make student feedback part of several activities each week.
5. Try to set aside a 10 to 15 minute listening time every week in which you or students pose a question or problem to the group and you agree to listen to students without interrupting them for any reason. This is much harder to do than it sounds! However, your willingness to ONLY LISTEN lets students know that respectful listening in your classroom is truly a two way process.
6. Include time for class meetings to discuss issues and problems that come up. Use a WIN-WIN problem solving approach for creating solutions that meet both your needs and students' needs.
7. Involve students in creating options and making decisions about homework, review and study practices, class assignments, and tests.
8. Make participation a significant part of your academic grading. Develop criteria with students that describe fully what active participation in learning means. Ask students to assess and reflect on their participation skills, at the close of an activity, at the end of a unit, and near the end of a grading period.

When schools link "best practice" and academic standards to conflict resolution infusion, teachers are more likely to try out new strategies that build a more positive learning climate and teach content in ways that give every student has an opportunity to be successful.