

CONFLICT MANAGEMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION REPORT

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Confessions of a Low-Tech Social Scientist

by James Schellenberg

The following essay was written in 2001 by James Schellenberg, author of the Conflict Studies textbook [Conflict Resolution: Theory, Research and Practice](#), which was reviewed positively in an earlier issue of the Report. In his reflections, Dr. Schellenberg, who has just recently retired from the Faculty at Indiana State University, describes his experimentation with various technologies to help teach his conflict studies course. Due to Dr. Schellenberg's retirement, the online course he describes is no longer offered.

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I am still not at home in our computer age. I do not know what people are talking about when they discuss computer hardware, and I always need special help when I start to use a new kind of software. I was a long holdout against e-mail, and I still receive it only at school, keeping me unbothered at home by a flurry of e-mail messages. I am not a Web surfer. Basically I use the Web only when I have a specific objective in mind. Yet, despite all this, I now find myself as the instructor of a Web-based course. How this came to be I would like to recount in these "confessions."

It certainly did not happen suddenly. It happened through a cumulative sequence of events over a period of years. These events might be summarized in terms of the following key developments: the program; the book; the television course; and getting on the Internet.

The Program

I have been teaching courses in social conflict for more than 35 years. I did this primarily as a scholar, not as a social activist. However, in the early 1990s, I became increasingly aware of a widespread interest in conflict resolution practices. I took mediation training and became aware of the effectiveness of conflict management tools and the

practical help such tools offer to all kinds of people. Working then with others in the Department of Sociology, I developed a graduate program at ISU in conflict resolution. In this, we were especially trying to bring together scholarly work with the more applied concerns of practitioners. We would take very seriously the scientific studies of conflict; however, we would try to relate them to what people find to be practical tools for conflict management.

That, of course, was a very ambitious undertaking. One of the problems we faced was the absence of a good textbook that would bring the interests of academics and practitioners together. I started to write such a book and sent sample chapters out to several publishers.

The Book

This was not my first book on social conflict. One such previous book, *The Science of Conflict* (Oxford University Press, 1982), was very well received by other scholars. However, the present book was to include a more practical orientation. This posed some problems, for work in the field was pretty sharply divided into scholarly and practitioner markets. Nevertheless, I finally found a publisher, and my book came out in 1996 (*Conflict Resolution: Theory, Research, and Practice*, published by the State University of New York Press).

With the book project done, I sought to promote the ideas of our program and my book for a larger audience. I cannot be sure just what combination of altruism, vanity, and simple dedication to the tasks I had started was involved in my motives. I knew there were a lot of people out there who needed more solid grounding in the field of conflict studies than would trickle in through our on-campus graduate offerings. Also, since our program was unique to Indiana, I explored the possibility of using the television delivery platform offered via the Indiana Higher Education Telecommunications System.

The Television Course

Offering a course via television provided some very special challenges for me. I had to get over some of my camera self-consciousness, and adapt some of the techniques, such as PowerPoint, that would provide special aids for distance students. I involved other Indiana State University faculty members in taped interviews, which I felt added a lot to the course. The course included a basic grounding in social conflict theory and research (the more skills development work came primarily through later on campus workshops), and this was sometimes hard to achieve in a format that mostly extended an on-campus class to the off-campus world. Fortunately, I always had an on-campus group as an anchor. However, we did not reach a sufficient

number of students to justify our continuing use of an IHETS channel. Besides, in this kind of pre-sentation, there were special difficulties, such as being able to hear fully from the students at a distance and the general artificiality of trying to extend the classroom by this new means. I began to explore what might be possible for a Web-based course.

Getting on the Internet

I did not develop a simple Internet course. The Internet is the home base, but the course also includes a series of lesson tapes. Conflict Resolution: Theory and Practice (Sociology 625), the online course in question, is divided into 12 lessons with a videotaped program for each lesson. In the videotapes, I can provide what would be lecture materials in an on-campus class, and I also can add other materials, including a special interview for almost every lesson. I found Ron Payne and Stacy Livingston most helpful for my development of these videotapes. Initially, I tried to build in one on-campus meeting for students to share individual projects. My thought here was to promote face-to-face contact; however, this on-campus requirement had to be relaxed in favor of a videotaped presentation for the more distant students. Beyond that, I try to make optimum use of the Internet. In my planning for this, I found Dr. Sharon Guan more helpful than anyone might imagine. I have gradually built into my CourseInfo site the main ingredients that the Internet can provide. I first offered sociology as an Internet course in the spring of 2000. As I write this one year later, I am offering the course for the second time.

Internet course delivery has presented me with both major problems and enormous advantages. It is, of course, a problem not to see your students face-to-face. Although you actually can have more contact with them in discussion forums and e-mail exchanges than you usually would have in a regular class, there is still a major problem with student motivation. Many students are not self-motivated enough to do the work without the discipline of regular class meetings. Some expect this to be an easy class, and soon find it to be more challenging than they wanted. In any event, there is a rather high drop-out rate for the class, and this always signals a problem. In addition, there have been more particular problems with my Internet teaching. These include the difficulty of getting students properly enrolled in the course and on the Web site. Many students seem to have special problems, especially when they try to enroll late. Therefore, I have used the first week of the semester as basically a "dead" week for getting on the course-and there are still students who need special help in getting in weeks later. Since I have each lesson planned for a particular week (to encourage steady student progress and to help keep them together for their class discussions), there are obvious problems for late-starters.

Another special problem has developed in my attempt to use electronic reserve. Students seemed to have no end of problems (including the necessary patience) in getting documents onto their own systems. This year I have abandoned general electronic reserve in favor of posting, on my Web site, a few selected articles and a larger number of article summaries.

But there are also enormous advantages with the Internet format. Not only is there flexibility for students to do their work when they wish, but the instructor, as well, is free to work when and where (either at home or at school) he wishes. CourseInfo provides ample opportunities for class discussion. I currently use the Discussion Board feature (one Forum for each lesson) for general discussion by the class as a whole. I raise basic issues, and the students take it from there. I also use the Group Pages feature, which allows the creation of discussions for smaller groups. Of course, it is not face-to-face interaction, but the comments are often more carefully considered than they would be "off the cuff," and this might give this framework advantages as well as disadvantages. Another key advantage is the efficiency with which an instructor can use his time posting announcements, creating documents, and responding to e-mail. Such activities are made relatively effortless by the CourseInfo software. Assessment tools are also well developed for student surveys and quizzes, and the statistics provided on these and other course activities are truly amazing. The instructor can tell not only what the student did on a particular quiz, but also how often the student uses all kinds of course opportunities. Quizzes can be timed and limited to a single access. While I have not begun to use all the features provided by CourseInfo (for example, I have not used chat rooms), I generally find the program to be extremely convenient for organizing and delivering this course.

So, this is the story of how a low-tech social scientist came to be a satisfied customer of Internet delivery. I still have my qualms about the computer age. I still think books are more important than computers. And I have some misgivings about the way quantity considerations may take the place of academic quality in planning for distance education offerings. But these are the kind of qualms I have about almost any subject. Basically, I proceed in this new way without regrets.