

Handling Difficult Situations

What to do when you're not sure what to do

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Objectives

- See why we should discuss conflict
 - Look at sources of conflict
- Work through specific scenarios
 - Think about prevention

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Why Discuss Conflict?

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Bryan's suggestions:

- TAs might feel personally attacked
- Helps TA remain calm under pressure
- Situations may be complex; defer to professor or support services
- Helps TAs prevent, detect, and manage conflict
- Effective classroom management comes with experience
 - Balance TA responsibilities with student concerns/needs
- Small problems poorly handled can:
 - Distract TA performance
 - Cast dark cloud on semester
 - Prevent effective student engagement and learning

Sources of Conflict

Misunderstanding



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(This and the following sources of conflict are adapted by Bryan Grimwood, TA Mentor in Geography, from Edelman & Crain (1993) in Bloemhof & Zorn, 1999)

Misunderstanding: when communication lacks clarity (e.g. students don't fully understand instructions)

Image: <http://www.flickr.com/photos/tambako/3593686294/>

Sources of Conflict

Dishonesty



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Dishonesty: when one is dishonest about how one feels or what one is going to do (e.g. students expect an assignment to be worth 15% and you decide not to count it at all)

Image: <http://www.flickr.com/photos/chrisyjewell/3777610034/>

Sources of Conflict

Negligence



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Negligence: When one fails to take reasonable steps to carry out what is needed to ensure good discussion (e.g. coming to class unprepared)-if you give your word, keep it

Image: <http://www.flickr.com/photos/scottzuke/2371650422/>

Sources of Conflict **Intention**



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Intention: When one knowingly or unknowingly compromises someone else's best interest through their communication (e.g. a student expresses suspicion about a particular group of people, and insults someone else in the group without intending to)

Image: <http://www.flickr.com/photos/81094204@N00/3126979648/>

Sources of Conflict

Exclusive Interest



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Exclusive investment in one's beliefs: someone is unwilling to acknowledge another point of view

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Sources of Conflict

Failure to Establish Boundaries



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Failure to establish boundaries: When one does not clearly express expectations and limits (e.g. students telephoning the TA)

Image: <http://www.flickr.com/photos/elenaheshcuetphotography/4379908310/>

Sources of Conflict

Unwillingness To Deal With It



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Unwillingness to deal with conflict: when conflict is ignored, accepted, or denied instead of managing it. (e.g. TA doesn't mediate tense discussion)

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Sources of Conflict

Fear



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Fear: an emotion that can interfere with good, honest communication. (A TA becomes defensive because they don't know an answer)

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Activity

- Work in groups of two or three
- Look at scenario in next slides
- Make two columns on your page: “Possible action” and “Outcomes”
 - Fill these in noting good and bad actions as well as a few different possible outcomes for each

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Being asked a question during office hours
that you should know the answer to but
don't.

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One of your good friends ends up being one of the students in the class you're TA'ing, and expects you to go easy on them.

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In the TA room, you have lots of students to deal with, and one of your students in continually getting amateur tutoring by a random person while you're away from them.

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While proctoring a test, a student refused to hand in their test at the end of the time allotted. They had arrived late and were desperate for 60 more seconds.

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One time a student had asked me a question to which I explained the best of my knowledge and gave an example. Come marking time I found my example to them was incorrect, so I had to dock marks. Needless to say they disputed the loss in marks, having asked for my help earlier. I was able to remedy the situation by apologizing and adjusting their marks that time around.

Oh, and to make matters worse they passed this example around to most other students in the class.

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A student insists that you marked a question incorrectly, even after you show him the solution provided by the prof. The student insults you, telling you that you are too stupid to see his brilliant answer.

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Preventing Conflict

Primary: Prevent conflict before it occurs

Secondary: Detect problem early

Tertiary: Manage the problem



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Adapted by Bryan from <http://www.oucom.ohiou.edu/fd/monographs/difficult.htm>

Primary (prevention before it occurs)

- Know course expectations
- Orient learner well
- Set clear expectations/goals (TA and student)
- Reassess mid-course

Secondary (early detection)

- Pay attention to your hunches
- Don't wait to address
- Give specific feedback early on
- Monitor closely

Tertiary (manage problem)

- Attempt to minimize impact
- Seek help
- Don't pass an undeserving student

Image: <http://www.flickr.com/photos/michaelsarver/61543942/>