



# Conflict management through drama and peer teaching

## 1. Introduction

Conflict, like sugar, is a natural part of life: ... opposition of ideas, interests, or actions that results in a struggle over status, power and/or resources'.<sup>1</sup> It is more significant than an argument, which is just a symptom of a conflict or perceived conflict.

There is nothing intrinsically bad about conflict. Conflict acknowledges or makes explicit the tensions between competing forces, and 'the absence of conflict may signal apathy, disinterest, non-involvement and alienation'.<sup>2</sup>

Conflict offers the opportunity for humans to respond to its challenges, to seek new pathways and change perspectives. The emotion we invest in dealing with conflict may even provide the energy and impetus that helps us to resolve it, sidestep it, reconfigure it so it is no longer a conflict, or just live with it.

Not all conflicts can be simply or directly resolved. Sets of interests will continue to clash if they are beyond the protagonists' power to alter. Power relationships



cannot always be changed, even if that is the wish of all parties in dispute, and however willing one party may be to play ball often the antagonist cannot be made to join the game too.

Conflict can give us valuable new insights into our lives, and the lives and values of those around us. That is why in *Cooling Conflicts* the commonly used phrase *conflict resolution* is avoided in favour of the more even-handed words *conflict management* or *conflict handling*.

The problem with conflict, what causes distress, is that it easily becomes egotistical, when our emotions, interests and values become invested in an issue so wholly that we cannot recognise or accept that other people's may be different, and when the power relationship is unbalanced so as to obscure the substantive issues at stake and heat the emotions further. The frustration of conflict badly handled can then severely damage our egos. This is recognised in our laws:

'When conflict is not managed or resolved effectively it can linger, generate self doubt, undermine self esteem and self confidence, and can lead to confusion, anger, helplessness or depression, violence, and in some cases to suicide.'<sup>3</sup>

## 2. Contexts of conflict

Conflict and its undesirable manifestations can occur in any context of human life, at any level of society:

- within one person, e.g. where competing desires and interests cause distress and confusion
- between individuals, in interpersonal relationships, e.g. couples, work colleagues, family
- between groups, e.g. timber workers and environmental protesters
- between communities, e.g. different cultural groups in a city
- within the international arena, e.g. over territorial fishing rights
- Geo-political, e.g. border disputes
- cultural (in broadest sense), e.g. race, gender, socio-economic factors.



Often, conflicts at the more individual or personal level (those towards the top of this list) are at least partly fuelled by conflicts at the more generic (those towards the bottom). This is because we tend to make generic assumptions and to stereotype individuals on what we know, or think we know, of their groups. It is essential to the foundation of understanding conflict and its management, to remember that each of us is an individual and as such we need to respond in many different ways rather than according to pre-conceived assumptions and stereotypes.

### 3. Elements of conflict

The main basic elements of any dispute are clashes of interests, rights and power.<sup>4</sup> It is essential that we understand these when looking at conflict so that we can then address them when we go to manage the conflict.

#### Interests

Interests are the things that people want, demand or claim. They include the underlying motivations and can be substantive (tangible, e.g. money, or intangible, e.g. equality), psychological, (e.g. feelings of acceptance, loss of face), or procedural (e.g. fairness in the process).

#### Rights

Rights are the standards or values that define what is fair and/or appropriate or determines what parties are entitled to. They may be determined by legislation (e.g. laws and codes of conduct), established by societal norms (e.g. shelter and food), or set by personal values.

#### Power

Power is associated with authority, status, influence or control of finance and resources. Identifying the power issues is essential, as well as being aware of our own power within the conflict management process itself. If this is not accounted for then escalation can occur and may lead to aggression, threats, retaliation and/or violence. Because of the fear frequently associated with power the issue/s may stay unresolved and fester. One of the most important questions to establish in any conflict is 'Who is powerless?'



These are what Friberg<sup>5</sup> calls the Content [C] of a conflict. In his handy ABC he identifies two other components: Attitudes [A] where these substantive issues are imbued by the protagonists with attributes – such as the cognitive attribution of enemy qualities to the antagonist(s), emotively associating negative feelings towards them, or reading intentional behaviours in terms of their own hostility; and Behaviour [B] – including both action and verbal and non-verbal communication. These three components reinforce each other so as to form a vicious circle of conflict escalation.

## 4. Common sources of conflict

Common causes of conflict include:

- competing demands on limited resources
- differences in perceptions and/or expectations
- differences in values
- differences in deeply entrenched behavioural codes
- personal sensitivity or over-sensitivity
- low self-esteem
- poor training, e.g. interpersonal, social, professional, etc.

These basic causes can quickly escalate, especially if one or both protagonists elevates their own values to the rank of immutable truths, or alternatively perceive themselves to be a victim in the clash.

Once a conflict is under way, further developments have the potential to occur:

- the same information can be interpreted differently
- goals appear incompatible
- ‘personal space’ boundaries are perceived as being violated
- role boundaries are unclear
- old wounds continue to fester
- the original issue develops into another problem which is only a symptom of the real underlying concern.





## 5. Escalation of conflict

It does not take much for conflict to escalate. People can become emotional and react quickly. Sometimes they get stuck in their positions and reach a point where the original issue is lost in other issues. They may have invested time and energy in the issue, or there may have been challenges to their self-perceptions and sense of self-worth. Any of these can push the budding conflict into a new form, out of control of the protagonists.

It is difficult to remain rational and unemotional in conflict. All the parties have their own perceptions and their own sense of personal investment in the issue. It is easy to work from assumptions about the other party's motives, values and/or behaviours. These can easily become subsumed into emotional fears (particularly of losing power). Tolerance is extinguished and once this has occurred the conflict has escalated.

As the interaction becomes more complex and difficult to comprehend the individuals involved in the conflict tend to simplify it by finding only one problem and one main source — the other party.<sup>6</sup> The antagonist becomes depersonalised and eventually demonised, which makes communication even less likely.

Conflicts tend to escalate in quite clearly identifiable phases, which have been variously described. The *Cooling Conflicts* program use a simple, three-phase description of escalation.

### Latent conflict

This is the first stage, where the conditions for conflict exist — a potential tension of interests, rights or power, which has not yet reached the stage of a clash. This is characterised by some or all of those affected being quite unaware of any problem.

### Emerging conflict

The next stage is where those conditions are forming themselves into a clash. In this stage, some of those affected are dimly or partially aware of the conflict. Often, it is those on the edge, or outside the conflict, who see it most clearly, rather than the protagonists who are bound up in their egocentric positions.



## Manifest conflict

This is the stage when the conflict is resulting in action that is visible and unmistakable to all, usually with anger, frustration and often violence.

Another writer usefully categorises this process in more detail from the protagonist's point of view:<sup>7</sup>

- **(latent) discomforts** — uncomfortable and not quite sure what the problem is ... lead to
- **incidents** — interactions leaving participant/s upset or irritated ... which lead to
- **(emerging) misunderstandings** — dominated by incorrect perceptions and confusion ... which lead to
- **tension** — dominated by negative thoughts and opinions. Empathy diminishes ... which leads to
- **(manifest) crisis** — behaviour is changing and extreme action is contemplated. Polarisation is evident. Conflict has become a self-fulfilling process.

In any conflict, it takes two to tango, to escalate the conflict. Action is always followed by response. Responses too, can be categorised as various types:

- **avoidance** — withdrawing from the conflict, pretending it is not happening
- **accommodation** — giving in and yielding to the pressure
- **assertion** — facing the problem, highlighting the discrepancies and maintaining one's position
- **aggression** — returning force and antipathy in equal measure, or more.

Especially in the early stages of a manifest conflict, any response is likely to lead to escalation (because of the 'attribution' process described above). However, some responses are more likely than others to be able eventually or in the longer term to contribute to defusing or resolving the conflict or de-escalating it. But not until some further ingredients are added, to permit protagonists to detach from that ego-centrism and identify not only their own needs but their antagonists.





## 6. De-escalating conflict

It might seem superficially that avoidance or accommodation are the most likely responses to lead to conflict resolution. Immediately, this might be so, but ultimately confronting the problem may prove more productive. Pretending the conflict is not happening does nothing constructive or pro-active to deal with the causes of the clash, and so cannot cooperate with other parties to deal with them.

Similarly, giving in to the antagonist's pressure is likely to both disadvantage the protagonist, and leave a residue of distrust and resentment. More confrontational responses are potentially more productive methods of conflict handling because they are pro-active, and can sometimes be brought to address the conflict and its causes rather better.

However, different cultures have different ways of managing conflicts, and the cultural context of a conflict is very important. Assertion is a more acceptable behaviour in some cultural contexts than others. In some cultures the values, mores or power structures make it quite improper to engage in assertive behaviour. In some cases more indirect forms of conflict management are called for, including, in the first instance, avoidance and accommodation.

## 7. Conflict management through drama

Before any dramatic event can happen, the participants must agree to abide by the basic **contract** of drama, which is that they will share the willing suspension of their disbelief in order to enter together the fictional world of the drama. Put simply, if all the participants do not accept the fiction, then the fictional world cannot be created. Drama can only happen voluntarily, at the will of all the participants.

This is important for another reason, that drama provides a safe space where the participants agree that whatever happens in the fictional and real life contexts will remain distinct. The fictional conflicts that the characters have will not be translated back into the participants' real lives and, conversely, that the tensions and affections of real life will be suspended in the interest of keeping the fiction authentic. Drama is above all an ensemble art form, depending on every participant playing their part to create a unified whole.



This means that the contract must be prepared for, the space and the event made special. In a conventional theatre this is easy. The building and all the design features are designed to help the audience and actors know and follow their roles, everyone's motivation is congruent and nobody is there unwillingly. In a classroom, training or counselling group, the messages may be entirely different. The building is designed for something entirely different, and members of the group may have resistance to the idea of using drama. They may not like or trust each other or the environment.

Therefore, preconditions have to be established. Participants have to be helped to establish and accept the contract. There must be trust that the other participants will honour the rules of the context of the dramatic event, and of the fictional context. An ensemble must be created. Sometimes these rules need to be spelt out and agreed explicitly.

Often, dramatic games and exercises are used, firstly as ice-breakers, then more specifically to develop trust and concentration, or to focus on the particular theme of the drama work to be undertaken. This is akin to the preconditions for conflict mediation. Before any progress can be made, the antagonists must at least agree on the need to have the mediation and on the establishment of the equivalent safe space, the mediation context mirroring drama's context of the dramatic event.

## Preparation

As part of ensuring that the contract is established, and the functions distinct and agreed upon, time and care must be devoted to preparing and focusing the participants. An appropriate mood and readiness must be established. In a conventional theatre this is assisted by the physical location and surroundings – for audience, the design of the theatre and the rituals of attendance; for the actors the set, costumes and make-up.

In other settings the location may actively work against the operation of drama – in the classroom, the clinic or the street, which were all designed for something entirely different. The implication of this is that a preparation phase is necessary. Even in a theatre, the actors need a warm-up, both physical and psychological, while the opera audience at least needs an overture. In the enhanced forum theatre which is the key drama technique in the *Cooling Conflicts* program, the participants need focusing, and sometimes to warm-up into an appropriate mood and physical readiness.



## Enrolment

If, in addition, participants are being asked to take role, even if this is just a generalised shift of viewpoint ('this has happened to you – how do you react?') it is crucial that they are enabled to focus intellectually and emotionally so that they can operate and respond appropriately. Particularly if they are asked to adopt a realistic, personalised or complex role where they will be expected to empathise and respond as a specific character perhaps very alien to their own disposition, it is crucial that time, space and appropriate preparation be allowed for this enrolment process. This often takes the form of concentration exercises, preliminary improvisation, in-role writing, artwork or physical tasks.

## Dramatic action and tension

The space needs to be made as appropriate as possible with the fictitious situation. Appropriate time must be made for the action, in order to fully establish concentration and dramatic tension. Dramatic tension, essential to the effective operation of any drama, will only occur if the characters' goals and purposes are strong, their tasks are clear, and the action is delayed by appropriate constraints. This is crucial.

There are basic skills necessary for participants in any form of drama, including:

- the ability to make and accept the contract and the functions appropriate to the genre
- the ability to sustain and take responsibility for shaping dramatic action appropriately
- the ability both to respond and to interact sensitively and appropriately as an actor.

## Reflection

Drama generates its own meanings, most of which are not, or not fully propositional. They cannot be reduced to simplistic resolutions and assumptions or written down as exam answers. However, it is possible, and in some cases necessary, to reflect upon the meanings, those personal to each participant and those shared by the group.





This important phase, sometimes known as debriefing, always happens spontaneously. Following a conventional play, audience and actors, usually separately, chatter energetically and gradually formulate their considered responses.

The same may be seen following forum theatre or improvised drama. In the case of inexperienced participants, particularly in role-play exercises, this reflective process may need to be carefully structured, and even to begin within the dramatic fiction itself. If there is a teaching, counselling or clinical component, this is particularly crucial, to make explicit the nature of the experience just shared, and what of useful knowledge may be derived from it.

## Limitations and constraints

Drama and theatre entail a number of limitations and constraints, which spring from the nature of the art form itself, which must be borne in mind when contemplating using drama in the arena of conflict management.

### Fiction

Drama is fictional and voluntary. Even if dealing with real-life events, the dramatist or participant group selects from and adapts those events to construct and manipulate the dramatic narrative *at will*. The drama can only happen at the conscious will and intellectual and emotional commitment of all the participants.

For instance, where the conditions for either empathy or distance are not present, the depiction and exploration of conflict through drama become either impossible or spurious. Young people enmeshed in the complexities of real conflict, in places such as Northern Ireland, are proving unable or unwilling to accept the way dramatic fiction plays with what for them is their truth.<sup>8</sup>

### Protection and exposure

For the actor/participant in drama, there is a dialectic between protection and exposure, exploration and communication. On the one hand, the dramatic fiction permits the freedom to explore an unknown landscape, emotional or ideological, without consequences. This may involve the participant in exploring his/her own personal experience, but protected from embarrassing or wounding disclosure ('this is not me, it's only the character'). On the other



hand, the presence of an audience imposes the need to perform, to make actions recognisable to communicate them to others, which to a degree means fixing or typing them.

It takes a skilled actor, with time for rehearsal, to marry these conflicting demands authentically. To ask inexperienced participants, for example in a role-play, to take on a new situation, often with little enrolment or preparation, and act it out immediately, or with a few minutes preparation for an audience, is asking for unauthentic emotion and superficial understanding of the dynamics, as well as inept performance. An audience of colleagues may in fact be more exposing than strangers, disposed to laugh at the depiction rather than scrutinise the behaviour depicted.

It is important to decide whether:

- 1 the purpose is spontaneous exploration, in which case there should normally be no external audience that will interfere with the concentration — at most a video-camera or a couple of briefed monitors.
- 2 the purpose is communication through performance — in which case time should be scheduled for rehearsal and fixing. In forum theatre, for instance, the audience, known as spect-actors, are invited to participate, but not until rehearsed actors have enacted the problematic situation.

### Questions not answers

Although the drive of dramatic tension is towards complete resolution of conflict, very rarely in adult drama is the happy ending either complete or believable. The primary job of the dramatist is to problematise, to raise the questions that a particular situation or group of characters can generate. The art of the dramatist is in making the conflict as hard as possible to resolve. The meanings that emerge from the drama, even after appropriate reflection, are never fully explicit. They are an inextricably interwoven framework of intellectual and emotional understanding, indirect and non-discursive. They cannot be told, but they can and do resonate with the participant's real life experience. They are therefore very difficult to convey to others, even other participants, especially in words.

All drama itself can do in the field of conflict mediation is to provide a range of alternatives, and to make visible other ways of looking at the conflict, other possible avenues to explore.



## Unpredictability

Drama's meanings are provisional and ambiguous. The heroes we sympathise with, from Hamlet to Mickey Mouse, are flawed or just a little demonic.

That's what makes them recognisably human. The more problematic the character's motivations and actions, the more we can exercise that dual affect of empathy and distance, emotion and thought. These resonate with the real life experience and understanding of the participants in ways that can be apprehended but not fully comprehended or explicated.

This makes drama very suitable for setting up difficult and wayward challenges in say, training situations where the client is being trained to deal with the vagaries of real life conflict, such as counselling or police work. Drama is a quite unsuitable vehicle for linear processes, for wherever standard procedures or correct procedures are needed in real-life.

## Impermanence and transience

Drama is a lived event, experienced in the moment, and only partially recaptured afterwards through reflection or replay. This makes any dramatic action, or behaviour observed within a drama, very hard to analyse cognitively or to use systematically. Observation and reportage, or use of video or tape-recording, can help recapture the moment, but only through a transformation which must be recognised as such. In particular, written dramatic text — script or transcript — is extremely unreliable, because it can only deal with the verbal text, and perhaps a few of the grosser non-verbal actions embodied in annotations or stage directions, and cannot reveal the interplay of language, action and gesture, text and sub-text.

## Dramatic conditions

Drama illustrates, represents, explores and can illuminate conflict, but it is *not* a way of solving real conflict. In real conflicts, the necessary conditions for drama to operate are rarely present. The participants, whether actors or audience, must necessarily agree to suspend their disbelief in order to engage in drama, which the protagonists in conflict are rarely able or willing to do. A characteristic of most real conflicts is that the protagonists won't agree to anything. The participants must be able to empathise with both sides of a question. If the protagonists in a real conflict could empathise with each other they would have de-escalated or abandoned the conflict.



At the same time, the participants in drama must be able to distance themselves from the characters, to be able to analyse the characters' needs, motives and interests for what they are. This is a very necessary pre-condition for resolving a real conflict, but it does not just happen.

A mediator's skill is often necessary to help the protagonists in a real conflict extricate themselves from their egocentric view of the situation, to identify what they are or might be willing to trade, and to see the conflict at sufficient distance to accept that a total personal victory might not be achievable or desirable.

This does not mean that drama does not have its uses. Everybody is at some time or another – at most times, in one or another context – in conflict.

However, everybody, every student, can look at the *notion* of conflict quite coolly, and learn *about* how conflicts happen, and how they might be mediated. That is drama's job – illustrating, representing, exploring and illuminating the underlying principles of conflict, embodied in the fictional conflicts that can be played with and manipulated in drama and theatre. Then the students have a fund of understanding that they might be able to summon to their aid when they are in a real-life conflict, or have to mediate in somebody else's.

## 8. Peer teaching

The use of peer teaching to enhance learning is an established practice which has been used extensively in primary and secondary schools, in the field of sports coaching, and in a range of other formal and informal learning environments.<sup>9</sup> Although peer teaching can involve students of the same age teaching each other, or even younger peers instructing older students, the most common and successful application in schools has involved older peers teaching younger students.

There has been a large number of recent studies into the effectiveness of peer teaching in schools as educators search for more effective ways of engaging students in their learning. All these studies have found clear and convincing proof that peer teaching can be an extremely effective tool for improving learning in the classroom.



Peer teaching has been shown to be valuable in a wide variety of subject areas and teaching environments, and four major educational benefits have been identified as apparent in all these settings.<sup>10</sup> Every one of these four educational benefits are strongly present in *Cooling Conflicts* at all stages of the program.

**1 Students' learning is maximised when they are able to apply what they have learned in meaningful ways to new contexts.<sup>11</sup>**

Peer teaching younger classes about conflict management through drama produce much clearer and more sophisticated understandings of the *Cooling Conflicts* program in the peer teachers in every case. Whilst they are being taught, the key and focus classes increasingly demonstrate an understanding of conflict management through drama, but it is only when they teach their younger peers that they really grasp the concepts of mediation and de-escalation and begin to apply these in their own lives.

**2 The most conducive environment for learning is an interactive and cooperative one, characterised by dialogue.<sup>12</sup>**

This is particularly evident when junior secondary focus classes work with the senior drama key class students. The interactions between the peer teachers and students reflect high levels of cooperation and enthusiasm and clearly operate as dialogues. Focus class students identify the peer teaching by the senior drama class as the highlight of the experience because they feel they can identify with their peer teachers and because the learning relationship is cooperative and interactive.

**3 Students learn more in a secure, cooperative classroom atmosphere where they take responsibility for their learning.<sup>13</sup>**

Forming groups to plan and peer teach empowers the key and focus class students, allowing them to work cooperatively and giving them a sense of ownership of their work. Drama is by its nature a student-centred and cooperative enterprise, and when this is linked to the positive mentoring provided by peer teaching, the classroom atmosphere becomes highly supportive and empowering for the students.

**4. When students take responsibility for their own learning, and use innovative methods to do so, motivation is higher and learning more sustained.<sup>14</sup>**





Students exhibit very high levels of motivation in the *Cooling Conflicts* program. Key class students, while initially nervous about teaching younger classes, greatly enjoy the experience and devote significant amounts of time and energy to it. Some students emerge as natural teachers. Some students with little commitment and little interest in learning about conflict management became the most enthusiastic and active in the teaching of it. The same pattern is true of focus classes. Students who may be very quiet and passive during the learning phase emerge as natural leaders, and teachers, when working with groups of primary school students.

## Empowering the peer teachers

Some very recent research to examine the benefits of peer teaching for those doing the teaching was conducted in 1998<sup>15</sup> and the results indicate that peer teaching increases both social and intellectual awareness. The peer teachers also showed significant gains in empathy, and were more clearly able to recognise that they could change habitual patterns of behaviour. Finally, this research also showed that peer teaching empowered the students, increasing their sense of mastery and self-esteem. The authors of the study concluded that it ... ‘would be hard to think of another method that would enable so much intellectual, social and personal growth.’<sup>16</sup>

## Empowering the learners

Other recent research has focused on the effects of peer teaching on the students being taught.<sup>17</sup> This research has produced clear evidence that teenagers learn more effectively from their peers than from traditional, teacher-centred instruction. One study found that this was particularly evident with students with low academic achievement and learning difficulties. Whilst the students in the study being peer taught showed much higher levels of literacy and comprehension, there was no significant difference in classroom behaviour between them and the students receiving teacher-centred instruction.<sup>18</sup>

## Peer teaching versus peer mediation

The use of school students as peer mediators has also become widespread in recent years due to increasing concern with conflict in schools. Programs using peer mediation are most common in primary schools both in Australia



and overseas, and in most cases upper primary students are trained in simple mediation techniques and then encouraged to act as mediators outside the classroom.

Some recent studies have claimed outstanding success in reducing conflicts in primary schools through the use of peer mediation.<sup>19</sup> However, a major review of nine peer mediation programs carried out in four states in the United States questioned the validity of most of the findings.<sup>20</sup> Whilst reported incidents of conflict declined in many of the primary schools, there was very little evidence to show that the students of the schools had actually learned to manage their conflicts better, or that conflicts were genuinely de-escalated by the peer mediators. Where all the students were also actually taught themselves about conflict management there were much clearer indications that conflict in the schools was reduced.<sup>21</sup>

The American experience and the *Cooling Conflicts* research both suggest that students, especially secondary school students, are far more likely to become competent at managing conflicts in their own lives if they are empowered to do so by learning about conflict management and then teaching what they have learned to their peers.



## Footnotes

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