

Are tension and conflict in groups essential ingredients for learning? Or is harmony preferable?

Katy Newell-Jones and **David Colbourne** reflect on how different perceptions of conflict influence approaches to group facilitation and make recommendations for dealing effectively with tension and conflict in groups.

Introduction

In the DFES strategy *Putting the World into World-Class Education* (DFES, 2004), conflict resolution is included as one of the eight key concepts for ‘instilling a global dimension into the learning experience’ (p6). Conflict resolution is described as ‘understanding how conflicts are a barrier to development and why there is a need for their resolution and the promotion of harmony’ (p7). Whilst we applaud the inclusion of conflict resolution, we are less comfortable with the broad implication that conflict is ‘bad’ and that harmony is ‘good’.

We come to this debate as trainers of facilitators. The term *facilitator* is used to cover those occasions when a community activist, tutor, trainer or teacher actively engages groups in discussion and participatory activities. We would argue that there are parallels between the ways we view international tension, conflict and war, and the ways we deal with interpersonal tensions between individuals within and between groups. These in turn are linked to how we experience and deal with our own intra-personal tensions and conflict, within ourselves. As facilitators, understanding how we perceive and deal with our own internal tension (and how we perceive tension in the world around us) can be valuable in exploring and developing our approach to dealing with conflict and tension in groups. We hold in mind a global perspective, and there is a wealth of material which could be explored here, including sociological perspectives on conflict and change. We have intentionally focused this article on the needs and interests of facilitators working directly with groups, and hope that readers might take up the task of broadening the discussion.

Models of causes of tension and conflict

Schellenburg (1996) describes three different ways of perceiving conflict, each of which tends towards different responses or solutions. Firstly, conflict can be perceived as the result of detrimental *individual characteristics*, i.e. the assumption is that conflict is the result of specific – usually aggressive or manipulative – behaviours on the part of individuals. Inevitably, if conflict is perceived in this way, then there is a strong sense of blame and solutions sought will focus on removing or changing the behaviour of individuals.

Secondly, conflict can be seen as a natural part of the *social process* within groups, resulting from different perspectives and having both positive and negative aspects. Ways forward include dialogue and exchange of perspectives, where participants have a chance to understand the context and rationale behind differing viewpoints. Consensus might not be achieved, but greater mutual understanding is usually possible.

Thirdly, conflict can be seen as a natural result of social interactions, including competition, and strongly influenced by *social structures*, or their absence. Solutions would focus on using formal structures as a framework for future actions and interactions.

Clearly the roots of tensions and conflict do differ: however, if an individual has a bias towards one model of conflict, this will influence the kinds of approaches to conflict resolution they adopt.

Western view of conflict and peace

Since September 11 2001, the Western view of conflict, terrorism and war has hardened, characterized by George W. Bush’s statement on November 6: ‘You’re either with us or against us in the war on terrorism.’ Victims and aggressors are sought. Often individuals are perceived as evil. There is a tendency to see conflict as ‘out there’ and deny its presence closer to home, hence the shock that the July 2005 London bombers might have been at least partially ‘home grown’. The West rarely sees itself as a factor in causing conflict but often sees itself as the essential ingredient in its resolution. This approach, often portrayed by politicians and in the media, corresponds most closely to the individual characteristic model, with a focus on identifying the aggressor(s) and focusing attention on removing or changing that person or group of people.

The role of the UN, where resolutions are sought and monitoring takes place to determine whether or not they are being complied with, is more in line with a social structure model, i.e. putting in place conventions and structures which will reduce conflict. However, it increasingly seems that the underlying intention of UN resolutions is to control the behaviour of a perceived individual transgressing nation. Schellenburg (1996) suggests ‘we are increasingly a world society in fact, but we have not yet forged the institutions that will effectively manage our world conflicts’.

Tension and conflict as features of development education

By its very nature development education not only involves tension and conflict but it encourages people to explore the tensions. Global issues such as poverty alleviation and climate change are complex. There are very few, if any, straightforward answers.

- Outsourcing UK jobs overseas has positive and negative implications for UK-based industry as well as providing often much-needed employment and foreign investment.
- Introducing an amnesty for asylum seekers might resolve the current preoccupation with the number of ‘illegal’

immigrants currently in the UK but it also might attract more economic migrants at a time when the UK is attempting to send a strong global message that this is to be discouraged.

Each of these topics is riven with competing perspectives, priorities and conflicting solutions. To hold considered opinions or make informed choices, people need to be aware of these tensions and make value judgments between competing priorities.

The participatory methodology adopted within development education is specifically designed to encourage dialogue and to explore and value different views. It would perhaps be surprising, or even worrying, if disagreements were not evident given the emotive issues also present. An essential element of development education is challenging attitudes, both ours and others'. The result can be transformational learning, that is learning which requires us to change our beliefs and values, to unlearn some of what we already know and to make new sense (Mezirow, 1995). By its very nature, this requires us to be aware of the tensions between existing mindsets and new ways of seeing the world.

So, if we are facilitators in development education, or in another field which involves challenging attitudes and complex issues, a social process approach to conflict might be the most appropriate. Here, tension is accepted and valued as a natural phenomenon with both positive and negative aspects and where there may be tensions which cannot be resolved. As facilitators, we need to be able to harness – and possibly even to promote – tension and conflict, and to use it productively.

Tension and conflict as natural features of groups

Facilitators often report that a group, or an individual in a group, is aggressive or argumentative – that they cause conflict – and if the source of this upset could be eliminated, then they would have a more successful, or at least less challenging, group. This way of describing conflict in groups is based on the facilitator perceiving conflict primarily as a result of the behaviour of individuals. Schellenburg (1996 p14) reminds us that 'If one emphasizes individual characteristics as a foundation for conflict, then the primary approach to conflict resolution is to change individuals'.

Internationally, this might result in the belief that the removal of Saddam Hussein will largely solve the internal conflict in Iraq, or that the introduction of ASBOs will solve anti-social behaviour in cities in the UK. In groups this approach can lead to scapegoating an individual and to the facilitator expending energy attempting to control the behaviour of individuals.

Another view is that tension and conflict are part of the group's natural landscape with participants being drawn towards occupying different roles in groups. This equates with Schellenburg's description of conflict and tension as social phenomena.

Tensions are as natural as the tide; they come and go; they are inevitable and have both positive and negative impacts.

They should be regarded as a natural feature to be explored and utilized, not something to be suppressed or ignored.

Using the metaphor of sailing, we can see the difference between the novice out in a boat who is confused, frightened or irritated by stormy seas and is obsessed with navigating towards calm waters and the experienced and skilled navigator, who accepts storms as natural events and who uses currents, tides and tide tables effectively to get to new places.

The third view assumes that formal structures are the key to reducing negative conflicting behaviours. A facilitator with this perspective will be more likely to introduce guidelines or ground rules (see Oxfam, 2006, p 6).

Internal tensions in facilitators

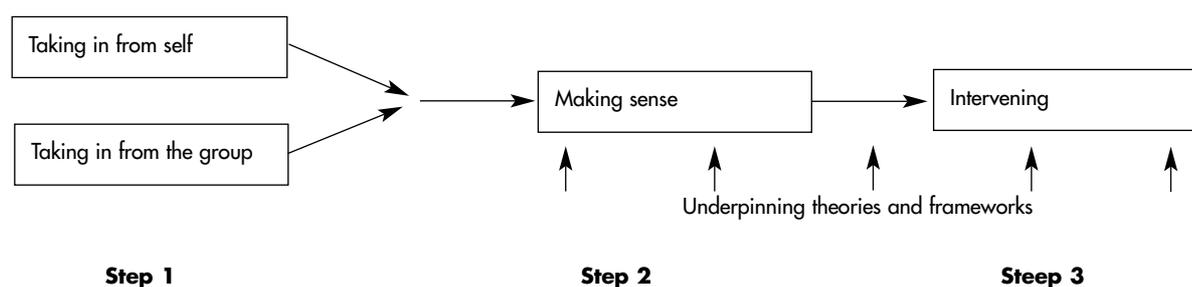
Everyone (including facilitators!) has internal tensions and contradictions (intrapersonal) which influence their external patterns and behaviours (interpersonal).

When facilitating a participatory development education activity internal tensions *might* arise from

- a lack of clarity about the role of the facilitator – see the six possible roles from Oxfam (2006) e.g. the opposing roles of passionate campaigner (committed) and the group facilitator focusing on the process of self-discovery and informed decision-making (impartial chairperson);
- the desire to present clear and authoritative information when the global issue under discussion is complex and fraught with contradictions;
- contradictions at a personal level between their own values and actions e.g. someone who owns a car and travels by air working with a group on climate change and carbon emissions;
- strong personal responses – both positive and negative – to individual participants; their behaviour or their opinions;
- a desire for a safe environment, free from tension where issues are explored rationally and consensually, yet the topic exposes strong emotions and radically different perspectives;
- tensions between a desire to be liked and the desire to challenge.

If facilitators are able to recognize and deal with their own internal tensions and conflict, then they will be able to work more successfully with group conflict. For example, a provocative group participant can play a catalytic role (sometimes experienced as disturbing or trouble-making), perhaps exposing unspoken views and taking the group into new areas.

A facilitator might choose to suppress or control such a participant: this might communicate to the group the message that strong opinions and disagreements are not valued. Alternatively, if the facilitator can put their own desire for a tension-free environment on one side for a period, and see tension as a natural phenomenon, and not the *fault* of an individual, the group may well rise to the challenge and benefit considerably from the debate.

Figure 1: The three steps in group facilitation

Models to draw on – facilitation

Casey *et al* (1992) provide a useful model for facilitation making explicit the need for self-awareness in addition to sensitivity to the needs and process of the participants. Group facilitators do three things: they take in what goes on around them and inside themselves; they then make sense of it; finally, they intervene. The diagram above (Figure 1) shows how we need to be aware of the need to acknowledge these two sources for our decision-making.

The model proposes that our own ideology is also important: our theories, frameworks and awareness of our prejudices enable us to evaluate what we are experiencing – and this can lead to more considered interventions.

Interventions are measured, calibrated gestures or words which might have a subtle or radical effect. They are not necessarily interruptions, and indeed deliberately doing nothing (when there appears to be some pressure on us to do so) may be a useful choice.

When conflict occurs in groups it usually involves the facilitator in some way. The facilitator might find their authority challenged directly, or become involved in resolving tension between participants or making space for quiet participants to be heard. If a facilitator becomes highly engaged in the debate at a personal level, they might notice that they have moved from being the facilitator of the group's learning to being a passionate campaigner on the topic – and this might be one of the key factors in generating the conflict. Choices can be made about appropriate actions, e.g. stepping back into the role of facilitator and encouraging the group to debate the key issues themselves.

Suggestions for facilitators

The discussion above leads to a number of recommendations for dealing effectively with tension and conflict in groups:

- include in ground rules or in the introductory comments an expectation that there will be conflict leading to tensions – and that these may provide powerful learning points;
- expect and encourage a variety of perspectives; all knowledge is partial and can be contested;
- be aware of the danger of interpreting conflict as the result of individual behaviour and the value of seeing it as a natural social phenomenon capable of triggering transformational learning;

- encourage the challenging of opinions and views, not of people or their integrity;
- draw on both what is going on for yourself and what is going on in the group when making sense of conflict and tension in groups;
- be prepared to negotiate guidelines for managing conflict, for example specific times when individuals who have spoken a lot are requested to actively listen and hear other people's views;
- let go of the desire for consensus as an ultimate goal; sometimes it is possible, at other times the sharing of opinions and the respect for different perspectives is a more realistic and achievable outcome;
- allow space after tension or conflict for debriefing and reflecting on the key learning points.

Conclusions

If we believe in transformational learning arising from challenging beliefs and values, then as facilitators we should accept tension and conflict, especially when dealing with complex global issues. By accepting that tension is a natural phenomenon in groups in which participants are sometimes drawn towards occupying polarized views and roles, we can change the ways in which we respond to tension and conflict and relish the learning opportunities which tension presents, instead of seeking to defuse or suppress it.

References

- Casey D, Roberts P and Salaman G, 'Facilitating Learning in Groups', in *Leadership – Organisation Development Journal*, Vol. 13, No. 4, 1992. pp. 8-13 MCB University Press
- DFES (2003) *Putting the World into World-Class Education*
- Mezirow, J (1995) 'Transformation theory of adult learning'. In M. Welton (ed), *In defense of the lifeworld: Critical perspectives on adult learning*, Albany: State University of New York (SUNY) Press (pp. 39-70).
- Oxfam (2006) *Teaching Controversial Issues*. Global Citizenship Guides. http://oxfam.org.uk/coolplanet/teachers/controversial_issues/index.htm
- James Schellenburg (1996) *Conflict Resolution: theory, practice and research*. Albany: State University of New York (SUNY) Press

Dr Katy Newell-Jones is a consultant, trainer and facilitator: www.kn-j.com katy@kn-j.com

David Colbourne is a psychotherapist, trainer and supervisor: www.emintel.com dc@emintel.com