

Theatre techniques for conflict management: A workshop for college freshmen orientations

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Abstract

A common problem among incoming college freshman is an inability to deal with conflict in their everyday lives. This is due to insufficient training during their primary education. The factors that make current training insufficient revolve around overly complex training practices and a lack of soft skills. To correct this problem, this report proposes the combination of select theatre techniques to be synthesized with current conflict management training practices. This report starts with an examination of the problems that exist with current training practices, followed by a literature review consisting of the techniques proposed as solutions, and ending with a module-based example of what this type of training would look like during actual implementation. A discussion of future plans for the research, including a method by which to measure its long-term efficacy, is also included.

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Chapter 1- Introduction

The path of young adulthood is filled with challenges and tribulations. One such prominent issue is that of conflict in an individual's everyday life. The inability to deal with conflict can lead to a deterioration of personal relationships, hinder an individual's ability to succeed in a workplace, and make it difficult to live in an increasingly diverse world (Brinkert, 2016; Saha, 2019; Tulgan, 2015). One group being particularly hard hit by a lack of conflict management skills is college students. Making the transition to the world of college is a difficult endeavor within itself. Students are placed in situations where they have to make adult decisions for the first time in their lives, all while trying to maintain their schoolwork and make plans for their future careers (Gottlieb et al., 2007). When the added complication of conflict arises, it can cause negative results for both students' personal and professional development. The inability to manage conflict can lead to a decrease in feelings of satisfaction when dealing with relationships, diminishing feelings of self-worth, and a lower likelihood of finding success in a competitive job market (Brinkert, 2016; Saha, 2019; Tulgan, 2015). However, conflict does not always have to be a bad thing. If students are given proper training on how to deal with conflict before they have to face it, the chances of these unproductive traits forming can be significantly reduced. In fact, when handled correctly, conflict can be as educational and as formative as many other parts of the collegiate experience (Bazezew & Neka, 2017).

Part of the reason college students struggle so much with conflict is because the current training on conflict management at the high school level is ineffective. In 2014 the Department of Education made attempts to teach students how to better manage conflicts by releasing training modules that specifically outlined conflict management plans for students grades K-12.

These plans ranged from negotiation strategies training to peer mediation. While solid in makeup from a conflict management literature viewpoint, current training modules have two primary problems. First, they add confusion by making little attempt to explain the complex conflict management techniques they describe. A person without advanced training in the field of conflict management (i.e., most students) would have a difficult time understanding the processes described in these training modules (Maier et al., 2017). Second, while the content of these training modules is sound, they lack training in soft skills that is crucial to make real life implementation of these conflict management techniques possible. Essentially, college students are being sent to universities and expected to quickly assimilate to an entirely new, adult lifestyle with little to no effective conflict management training. This can make it difficult for them to assimilate to this adult lifestyle from both a personal and professional viewpoint.

At its core, conflict management is connected to being able to relate and interact healthily with others. In order to fully understand the challenges that college students are facing in regard to conflict management training, the issue of underdeveloped soft skills has to be addressed. Soft skills¹ are the specialized elements of communication that often fly under the radar of development programs and can be difficult to define. Essentially, soft skills are the nuanced elements of human interaction. Teamwork, cultural understanding, reading the atmosphere of a room, nonverbal communication, etc. are all examples of soft skills. Without understanding how to utilize these elements of basic communication, it makes no sense to expect college students to understand conflict management as they are integral to the conflict management process (Tulgan,

¹The term “soft skills” has been controversial. Some argue that the word “soft” makes the skills being described seem lesser than the “hard” skills that are associated with areas of direct technical knowledge. Others suggest that a better term for “soft skills” would be “social skills,” “emotional intelligence,” or “human skills.” Because the term “soft skills” is used prevalently in scholarly literature reviewed in this report, the report uses “soft skills” to indicate aforementioned relational skills.

2015). Essentially, conflict management training without soft skills development is the equivalent of expecting college students to complete an assignment without giving them any sort of instructions or training.

The issues that college students face due to a lack of soft skills development training are two-fold. First, a lack of understanding of what soft skills is and how to use soft skills effectively. If college students have never been properly taught the concept and how to use the full potential of their soft skills, it is difficult for them utilize said skills to manage conflict. All of the nuanced communication elements mentioned above are useless to college students who have not received soft skills development training. Second, simply understanding correct soft skills usage is not enough. Once general development of soft skills has been established, students must learn to use their soft skills in order to specifically help them when solving conflict. Students must be educated on how to combine their soft skills with proper conflict management techniques in order to experience the full benefits of soft skills in relation to conflict management.

Having taken all of the above information into consideration, it became clear that a new type of conflict management training module would need to be created specifically for college students. It would need to be easy to understand in language and process. It would also need to put an emphasis on soft skills development. Therefore, in order to educate and prepare college students for conflict, this report offers a new conflict management training that consists of easier to understand language and that places an emphasis on developing students' soft skills.

As college is a time of change and growth, it makes sense to introduce soft skills at this age. Emerging adulthood is described as the period in a person's life between the age of 18 and 25 when they "actively attempt to assimilate and derive greater self-understanding from their

encounters with new events, transitions, and settings” (Gottlieb et al., 2007, p. 132). Going through a process of greater self-understanding is difficult enough without having to deal with the added struggle of conflict that arises between you and those that you come into contact with. Gottlieb et al. also point out two important points of discussion in their article. Their first point being that this is an age range when college students are susceptible to new forms of communicative development. This is due to the fact that they are restructuring and rebuilding how they interact with the world. Gottlieb et al.’s second point discusses how this is a time in the lives of college students where they are expected to have a strong sense of adaptability and make a large range of important decisions quickly (Gottlieb et al., 2007). Having to make important decisions quickly and under pressure can easily create conflict. Introducing soft skills in this age range can help as advanced soft skills can assist with adaptability and quick thinking.

When considering how to best build students’ soft skills, I reflected back on my own soft skills training. I completed my undergraduate degree in theatre performance. While working on this degree I learned many aspects of theatre training that could be transitioned to everyday life, the most notable being how the acting exercises I did to create a better stage performance were also highly successful at honing soft skills. These theatre techniques were also streamlined in application, and explained in the simplest language possible, to allow performers to achieve maximum performance ability in the often time sensitive theatre rehearsal process (Stanislavski & Benedetti, 2010). Taking these easy-to-understand theatre techniques that work well to develop soft skills, and combining them with existing conflict management techniques, would solve both of the issues currently facing college student conflict management training.

Ultimately, this new, easy-to-understand, theatre performance infused curriculum could be taught to students during their freshman orientation. Teaching students these skills right as

they begin their collegiate journeys will give them a greater understanding of how to navigate conflictual situations as they go along the path toward adulthood. This training will allow students to learn and grow from instances of conflict rather than having their entire environment disrupted. This goal will be accomplished in a threefold approach.

First, I will review two areas of existing conflict management literature (Conflict Coaching Techniques and Conflict Management Styles) and discuss the gaps to fill in their approach. I will then introduce two theatre techniques (Improvisational Theatre and Stanislavski's Action Verbs) as proposed solutions for better teaching students conflict management. Second, I will synthesize the elements of both the conflict management techniques and the proposed theatre techniques to create a new approach to student conflict management. Last, I will introduce my own conflict management curriculum, consisting of step-by-step training modules, that show the newly fused concepts in practice. This curriculum will seek to enhance soft skills development through the theatre techniques previously discussed. It will show the proper implementation of the combined conflict management techniques and soft skills enhancing theatre techniques through detailed instructions on real life application. It is my hope that the new conflict management modules will be both easier to understand and to implement thanks to the addition of the theatre performance techniques.

This work is important to me personally because I have seen first-hand how frustrating and disruptive conflict can be in the lives of students. I taught for four years in a high school classroom setting and currently have been teaching college freshman for two years. In these various positions, I have watched students try and fail to deal with conflict on a regular basis. While I have been given some advice and training on how to better help students deal with conflict, none of the materials I have been given ever seemed applicable to real life situations.

This was due to a lack of focus on soft skills development. They were also difficult to understand in terms of vocabulary and overall make up. If I could not understand the conflict management approaches myself, how could I expect my students to understand them? Even now teaching at the collegiate level, I still feel that better training could be given to students to help them manage conflict.

Thankfully, I have been lucky enough to receive further education in the field of conflict management during my time in the K-State Communication Studies MA program. Because of this training, I now better understand conflict management techniques. I am also in the unique position where because of the extensive theatre training I received during my undergraduate degree, I understand how to use soft skills communication in my everyday life. I use this combination method of theatre performance and traditional conflict management training that I am proposing often in my own struggles with conflict. I am confident in its effectiveness and feel that those who understand and utilize this approach are better equipped to handle conflict when it arises. Knowing first-hand how frustrating conflict can be for college students makes me want to share this approach so that they can learn how to better manage conflict and ultimately have happier and more productive lives.

Preview of Chapters

The remainder of this report consists of three additional chapters. Chapter 2 provides a literature review that serves to illustrate the research being done in the fields of the relevant conflict management techniques, youth development, and the proposed theatre performance techniques for improvement. This chapter also contains the synthezation of these two fields that serves as the basis for the curriculum that will follow. Chapter 3 includes the actual curriculum, providing detailed instruction on how to implement my proposed theatre performance-based

style of conflict management in the form of module workshop activities. This chapter details the specifics of these modules and what this approach would look like in actual implementation with students. Finally, Chapter 4 offers a summary of the report, potential for further improvement of practices, and concluding thoughts.

Chapter 2- Literature Review

A successful approach for teaching students how to deal with conflict can be found by reviewing the wide array of literature that has been published on the topic, and then by seeking to solve existing problems evident in current conflict management practices through the implementation of the chosen theatre techniques. This chapter begins with the review of conflict literature to provide an overview of the subject area. Following the discussion of conflict, it focuses on the demographic in question (traditional college freshmen) and reviews youth development literature. Next, it discusses the importance of soft skills and illustrates the connection between the theatre techniques and the conflict management techniques. After these grounding sections, two select conflict management techniques (Conflict Coaching and Conflict Management Styles) are discussed in detail, each followed by its theatre technique counterpart (Improvisational Theater and Stanislavski's Action Verbs) to be implemented for improvement.

Conflict

Conflict is “an expressed struggle between at least two interdependent parties who perceive incompatible goals, scarce resources, and interference from others in achieving their goals” (Wilmot & Hocker, 2017, p. 9). Based on this definition, it is seen that conflict can arise from multiple factors and evolve into a variety of unproductive situations. When conflict arises, individuals traditionally have been known to try and resolve conflict using elements of persuasion and verbal eloquence. However, these approaches have been found to be mostly unsuccessful (Freeman et al., 1992). Instead, it is proposed that those in conflict work with interveners in order to determine a method of conflict management that is useful for all involved.

A central theme in conflict management literature is the desire to understand different approaches that people take when faced with conflict. Every instance of conflict is unique, and

those involved in the conflict have personalized management styles that they feel are best. Therefore, it makes sense that the conflict management field is constantly evolving to understand different approaches to conflict resolution (Putnam, 2010). This creates an exciting, almost life like field for researchers to contribute to. Putnam puts forth two important factors when examining conflict management. First, it should be considered what those in a conflict situation wish to avoid. Second, collective stories can create a sense of unity among disputants as they allow for shared experiences to create common ground. In creating my own conflict management curriculum, I took both of these factors into account. People want to avoid feeling confused in a conflict situation and development of soft skills can aid in this area. In relation to collective stories, this is the primary staple of theatre making. If good conflict management is connected to storytelling, then it makes sense that theatre be used as driving lens for conflict management curriculum building.

Previous literature underscores the importance of conflict management and soft skills development among young adults. For instance, Pines et al. (2014) examined a group of undergraduate nursing students and found that those who were not trained properly in the area of conflict management, due to a lack of soft skills development, were more prone to “moral distress, burnout, absenteeism, and turnover” in their chosen profession (p. 85). Furthermore, they found that nurses who felt bullied due to conflict between themselves and coworkers were more likely to bully patients in return. The authors suggest that college curriculums need to incorporate conflict management training into the graduation requirements set forth by universities.

Youth Development

As with any sort of curriculum-based learning, understanding your target audience is key. Gottlieb et al.'s research discussed in Chapter 1 makes it clear that college freshmen are at an impressionable age. This means that they are more susceptible to new schools of thought, resulting in a better chance of absorbing new concepts. This makes them ideal for introduction to new learning methods like the ones described in this report. However, this can only be accomplished if students feel they are given the necessary tools to succeed in the new academic setting they find themselves in.

The average college freshman does not know much about conflict management because of a lack of proper training and the overemphasis on academic success measured in GPA and graduation rate. Rather than relying on such narrow definitions of academic success, students' success must be considered more holistically. As Schreiner (2012) suggests, students' success should be assessed in three key areas: academic engagement and performance, interpersonal relationships, and psychological well-being. Focusing on these markers as opposed to traditional ones helps college students to deal with the transition to adult life in a healthier and more productive way. It makes sense then to introduce students to good conflict management techniques at freshmen orientation as learning how to deal with conflict can contribute to success in all three of these areas (Brinkert, 2016).

Generally speaking, students in the traditional college age range have difficulty dealing with problems with no clear solution. They are better able to tackle problems with tangible solutions (e.g., creating a weekly schedule and keeping up with homework to pass a course), but struggle with problems that are complex and in flux such as the relational problems associated

with conflict management (King & Kitchener, 2004). Therefore, teaching students to be reflective thinkers becomes critical in their overall success in college.

Researchers Patricia King and Karen Strohm Kitchener introduced the reflective judgement model in 1994. Just as one of the main goals of conflict management is to get individuals to embrace the often-uncomfortable nature of conflict in an effort to learn from the experience, the goal of the reflective judgement model is to get individuals' thought processes to be rooted in the reflective thinking stages. The reflective judgement model is based on Dewey's idea that people make reflective judgements to bring closure to situations that cause them cognitive dissonance. The model categorizes the student thought process using a multi-tiered system consisting of seven stages, which are then divided into three subgroups: Pre-reflective thinking (stages 1-3), Quasi-reflective thinking (stages 4-5), and Reflective thinking (stages 6-7). Pre-reflective thinkers do not recognize that knowledge is an ever-changing thing, quasi-reflective thinkers recognize that knowledge can change but have difficulty defining their own beliefs, and reflective thinkers use data to form conclusions as they believe that knowledge is constantly being reconstructed (Patton et al., 2016). Part of being a reflective thinker is being able to successfully manage conflict. Therefore, not only does it make sense to focus conflict management research efforts on college freshmen, but it is also pivotal to ensure that future generations understand the positive impacts of reflective thinking. A large part of this effort will be to first make sure that students know how to manage the more nuanced elements of human communication through soft skills development.

Soft Skills Development

Given the importance of soft skills in dealing with conflict, it makes sense to include soft skills development as part of traditional college curriculums. However, young people are

growing up without such curriculum and an understanding of the soft skills necessary to effectively utilize conflict management techniques. Teng et al. (2019) argue that a lack of curriculum focused on soft skills development is a serious gap in current collegiate education systems not only in the United States, but on a global level. They assert that not including programs that are designed to develop soft skills among college students only sets them up for failure upon entering the job market. In fact, their research revealed that a large contributing factor to the unemployment rate among young people was related to students simply not understanding the elements of communication associated with soft skills.

Similarly, Cheng et al. (2019) suggest that, in an exceedingly competitive job market, employers have pivoted away from seeking employees with basic knowledge of their field and are now looking for individuals who have a natural inclination for soft skills. Anthony and Garner (2016) also found that development in soft skills made college students more desirable in the job market and made it easier for them to interact with their peers. Above all, they felt that heightened soft skills helped students to be better communicators. Based on these studies, it is clear that not giving college students the means by which to develop and hone these highly sought-after communication skills leads to a large disadvantage in their college and adult lives.

Due to their nature, one of the most effective ways to teach soft skills is using a hands-on approach. For instance, Dogara et al. (2020) explore the positive effects of teaching soft skills utilizing Project-Based Learning (PjBL). PjBL is a process in which a teacher introduces a challenge into the learning environment and the students then work together to solve the simulated challenge. This approach allows students to develop their soft skills in real time, as the only way to solve the challenge is to engage in activities that build soft skills. This process allows students to analyze the process as they learn it, leading to a higher chance of skills

retention. Dogara et al. argue that PjBL is an excellent alternative to teaching soft skills in a more traditional way such as rotary memorization. Soft skills cannot simply be learned by reading about them in a textbook. They have to be experienced and learned in real time. When examining how to best teach soft skills, Anthony and Garner (2016) also found that students preferred hands-on, group activities that had a high degree of real-life applicability. These studies underscore the value of my proposed solution of utilizing theatre performance techniques to teach soft skills development. These theatre techniques are hands-on and focus heavily on group involvement. They simulate situations that students might see in their everyday lives, so the connection to real-life applicability is clear.

In reviewing this literature, we can see how not teaching college students the importance of soft skills can negatively impact their lives and their ability to manage conflict. This is because soft skills are directly related to the principles of conflict management. Everything from their personal relationships, to their chances of finding a stable job, to how they communicate with the outside world for the remainder of their adult lives can be impacted. While soft skills are not the only solution to conflict management (as shown in the *Youth Development* section above), they are an important step in understanding and implementing effective conflict management techniques. Soft skills can help students better understand the way they communicate, and the communication styles of others. Because of how important soft skills are to communication in general, they are essential for conflict management. Research has shown that the best way to learn and develop soft skills is through hands-on activities that allow students to watch and feel in real time their soft skills grow (Dogara et al., 2020). As soft skills primarily teach individuals how to better communicate with others, it also makes sense that they be taught in a group setting. Increased soft skills allow students to better utilize conflict

management methods, which allows them to better interact with their peers, and ultimately makes them happier and more productive members of society. This can be accomplished by combining existing conflict management techniques with specific theatre techniques, thus allowing students to access the full benefits of the approaches. Two examples of this combination approach will follow: 1) Conflict Coaching and Improvisational Theatre and 2) Conflict Management Styles and Stanislavski's Action Verbs.

Conflict Coaching and Improvisational Theatre

Conflict Coaching

Conflict coaching is a method of conflict management that relies on the use of a mediator, similarly to many acting exercises. Conflict coaching is a relatively new form of conflict management (developed in the 1990s). While it has existed in various forms as early as the 1970s, it did not start to be considered as its own independent technique until a 1997 study at Macquarie University in Australia brought it prominence. Conflict coaching has two primary approaches. First it can be used when conflicting parties cannot be in the same room together. A mediator meets with each party separately and tries to help them resolve the conflict without ever having to meet. Its second use seeks to prepare an individual on how to deal with conflict before it happens. This approach is often used in the private business sector to help upper-level officials learn to deal with conflict between themselves and those they manage so that they are prepared if conflict should happen. Trainees meet with a mediator and discuss different solutions to potential conflicts that may arise in their profession (Brinkert, 2016). It is the second function of the technique that will be explored in this report.

In a test of its real-world applicability, conflict coaching was used to help head nurses manage conflict in the medical field. Trained conflict coaching mediators went into a hospital

setting and met with head nurses. They walked the head nurses through different types of conflict management techniques utilized under the conflict coaching method. After the head nurses completed their training in conflict coaching, they were assigned a lower-level nurse supervisee to train in the same conflict coaching techniques they were taught. By first starting with the head nurses, and then having them train their supervisee nurses, it was found that a positive trickledown effect took place in the hospital. This training hierarchy was intentional as the hope was that the head nurses would pass their knowledge of conflict management on to lower-level nurses, thus creating a hospital ecosystem devoid of conflict (Brinkert, 2011).

Given the success that the conflict coaching process has found in the fields of business and medicine, scholar Priyanka Saha advocates for trying its approach in a school system setting. She advocates for conflict coaching as a method of eliminating bullying in schools, saying that it is a healthy alternative to criminalizing the student doing the bullying. Saha points out that while conflict coaching is a solid and emerging technique in the conflict management field, she doubts its ability to help students manage conflict without being taught by a capable mediator and paired with an additional conflict management technique (Saha, 2019).

If conflict coaching requires an additional conflict management technique, Brinkert (2016) makes the argument that it makes sense to look for a technique grounded in a narrative based approach. He states that conflict coaching is an amalgamation of other conflict processes. Specifically, he talks about how the Comprehensive Conflict Coaching Model (CCCM) is narrative driven and dependent upon those involved being open to the possible solutions that others bring to the table. Applying this narrative element calls to mind a theatre technique used to build unity, trust, and teamwork among cast members when working on a theatrical production. The entire CCCM sounds very similar to the basic rules of improvisational theatre.

Both are narrative driven and are heavily dependent upon following the suggestions and ideas of others. Rather than trying to explain the complexities of conflict coaching and letting the technique stand on its own as Saha (2019) advises against, I am proposing that the concept be shown in action through the easy-to-understand use of improvisational theatre. Not only is improvisational theatre easy to understand, but in practicing the technique, participants are given training on the soft skills development necessary for this conflict management model to succeed.

Improvisational Theatre

Use of improvisational theatre to train college students in selective fields related to their choice of major has become increasingly popular in recent years (Reddick & Smith, 2020). It has been proven that practicing improvisational theatre can lead to a direct increase in soft skills development and the ability to adapt and react intelligently in high pressure situations (Leondard & Yorton, 2015). Improvisational theatre has been a staple in the theatre community for many years. Some of the best and brightest actors working in the industry today got their start studying improv theatre. The popularity of improv can largely be attributed to a theatre practitioner by the name of Del Close. Del Close was born in Manhattan, Kansas in 1934. He began his career doing small improv theatre shows in St. Louis before finally moving to Chicago. It was in Chicago that he began his work with The Second City Improvisational Actor Training Institution. It was while at Second City that Del Close worked to develop the form of improvisational theatre that is utilized today (DePasquale & Lewis, 2012). While the process that Del Close developed was a useful tool for actors, it wasn't long until it was realized that his approach to improv could be utilized in aspects outside of theatrical performance.

The argument made is that those who receive training in improv have increased reaction, adaptability, and understanding of others when dealing with conflict. This is thanks to the tenets

of improv. In its simplest form, improvisational theatre is two actors creating a scene where there was not one before. No script exists, character backstories are not discussed prior to the performance, the actors simply have to perform in a space where they have no safety net other than each other. In order for a performance to succeed, things such as non-verbal cues from your partner, the energy that the audience creates in the room, and the ability to quickly process and respond to the various twists and turns of the story being created around you are a must (Leonard & Yorton, 2015). These improv tenets are so effective in training students in conflict management because they promote soft skills development and are easy to understand and put into practice.

Second City CEO Tom Yorton and Second City vice president Kelly Leonard describe how improv can be useful in non-theatre settings in their book *Yes, And*. Leonard and Yorton felt validated in sharing the improv training techniques utilized by Second City after a New York Times article was published describing what Google looks for when hiring new employees. The article stated that Google looks for those who have the “ability to process on the fly,” a willingness “to relinquish power,” ease with “creating space for others to contribute,” and individuals who can “learn how to learn from failure” (Friedman, 2014). All of these abilities are related to soft skills development and can be taught through improv (Leonard & Yorton, 2015). While there is validity in Leonard and Yorton’s research, they are primarily focused on building soft skills among adult, working professionals to help them better succeed in their places of work.

A recent study concerning young professionals in the medical field examined these beneficial elements of improv. It was found that young medical professionals often view themselves as “different” from other members of the medical field. This “othering” can lead to a

disconnected staff and make it difficult for a medical establishment to offer the best care possible for patients. A proposed solution was to try and teach these young professionals empathy through improv theatre training. A training workshop was created and those that signed up were taken through an eight-week training session that focused on teaching “empathy” and how to “resonate” with the emotions of others. In this study empathy was described as “the ability to imaginatively reconstruct another person’s perspective and resonate with their emotions” (Zelenski et al., 2020, p. 1210). “Resonate” referred to “experiencing a small amount of what another person is feeling to help you understand their perspective” (p. 1210). Improv was chosen as the teaching catalyst for this study as both of these study objectives are key tenets of the improv approach. Participants were asked to complete a pre-and post-training survey to record possible change in their empathy and resonance abilities. At the end of the study, participants felt the improv training helped them better understand others in both areas (Zelenski et al., 2020).

The work of NYU researchers Ronica Reddick and Daniel Leeman Smith underscores the value of improv in the college curriculum. Reddick and Smith are working to create a training module that focuses on enhancing soft skills development using improv. Their target demographic is college students pursuing a bachelor’s degree in business. While they are focused on teaching how to better thrive in one’s career, the approach they use can easily be applied to conflict management training. The core concept of their research revolves around participants playing an improv theatre, role playing game that attempts to highlight the different sets of soft skills that may be needed in their chosen business professions (Reddick & Smith, 2020). I am creating a similar product, but with the idea of helping students deal with conflict among their peers as the desired end result. My training module would highlight the mediator-led, narrative and group cooperation elements that are trademarks of the CCCM of conflict coaching. My

approach would allow for improvisational theatre techniques to be naturally incorporated through the similarities that the two disciplines share.

An example of what my approach may look like can be found by reviewing the work of Hunter College professor Patricia Sternberg. In theatre there is a belief that all scripts consist of the same, or variations of the same, storyline. These storylines always revolve around an idea of conflict. In order for an audience to find a piece of theatre engaging to watch, conflict must happen on stage (Sternberg, 1998). Sternberg makes the argument that using theatre to teach conflict management is a natural decision because of the interwoven nature of theatre and conflict. She also highlights how clearly storylines in theatre define conflict. She describes a process of asking students to anonymously write down conflicts they are having in their lives on notecards. Problems such as fighting with parents, teen pregnancy, etc. are written down. Students are then placed in groups, asked to pick one of the cards, assigned characters, and tasked with acting out their chosen conflict using improv. This process helps students to recognize and become familiar with types of conflict they may face in their everyday lives, while also increasing their soft skills development. Being able to react quickly and confidently is a large part of improv. These are not skills that are naturally obtained. In order to become good at improv, the brain has to be worked like a muscle. The mental workout that improv exercises create promote quick thinking and an ability to react appropriately to what a fellow actor might throw at you. These same concepts are highly important when dealing with conflict (Rohd, 1998).

The connection between conflict coaching and improvisational theatre is clear when one considers the many similar characteristics the two methods share. Both use elements of role play to simulate real world situations. They also both use facilitators to help with scene creation and

the overall learning experience. The curriculum provided in Chapter 3 will further show this connection and outline real world implementation of the methods in their synthesized form. In doing so, Sternberg's approach is expanded. While her research focuses on exposing students to conflict scenarios, the exercises outlined in Chapter 3 will encourage students to try out actual solutions to conflict that can be carried over in their everyday lives.

Conflict Management Styles and Stanislavski's Action Verbs

While Conflict coaching and Improvisational Theatre are pivotal methods for conflict management, they do not address all facets of conflict management. Another important element of conflict management is knowing different conflict management styles and being able to use them effectively. There are multiple variables that can influence the conflict management style that a person chooses when in conflict. Individual goals, group goals, a person's personal background, the issue being debated, and many other factors create a unique situation for every instance of conflict (Brinkert, 2016). Because of this, understanding one's own disposition toward the conflict management styles in tandem with understanding the characteristics of all the styles is key. These tasks can be accomplished through use of Conflict Management Styles and Stanislavski's Action Verbs.

Conflict Management Styles

One of the best ways to deal with conflict is to understand the different approaches, or styles, that you and those you come into conflict with may implement to manage conflict. In researching conflict management styles, one must take into consideration the work of Robert Blake and Jane Mouton. In 1964 Blake and Mouton created a way for business managers to determine what type of management style they possessed when it came to dealing with conflict. They summarized that an individual's want to manage conflict existed in two dimensions and

could be illustrated on a grid. One dimension on the x-axis involved concern for people, and the other dimension on the y-axis involved concern for production. Between these two dimensions, it was theorized that six different conflict management styles existed (Forcing, Confrontation, Smoothing, Withdrawal, Compromise, and Avoidance), with styles being divided into counterparts shown on opposite ends of the behavioral grid (e.g., Confrontation and Avoidance). This process became known as Blake and Mouton's Two-Dimensional Styles Taxonomy (Nicotera, 1993). It is important to note that just because someone has a certain disposition toward a set style, this is not the style that they will always use. Based on the actual conflict situation, individuals adapt various styles to achieve their goals.

In 1976 Kenneth Thomas and Ralph Kilmann furthered their research by creating the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument. This is in essence a test that helped individuals determine the conflict management style they gravitate toward, while also helping them to learn about different styles available when faced with conflict. The various styles included: Avoiding, Compromising, Accommodating, Competing, and Collaborating (Hastings et al., 2019). With each of these styles there are pros and cons. What follows is a breakdown of each of the five conflict management styles as defined by Thomas and Kilmann:

1. **Competing:** A combination of assertive and uncooperative. When a person uses a competing conflict management style, they are power-oriented and mostly concerned with their own goals. Competing can mean standing up for your rights as an individual, but it makes it hard to function in a group dynamic.
2. **Collaborating:** A combination of assertive and cooperative. This style involves finding a solution that will make both parties in conflict content. Often issues will be examined on a deeper level to find a creative solution to an interpersonal problem. This approach is good for

maintaining a relationship but can be time consuming and mean giving up some of your personal ground.

3. **Compromising:** A combination of assertiveness and cooperativeness. This style is all about finding the middle ground. While it can help to find a solution that both parties are okay with, it does not examine issues as in depth as the other styles.

4. **Avoiding:** A combination of unassertive and uncooperative. With this style a person does not try and address their concerns or the concerns of others. This style is good when trying to be diplomatic or avoid a threatening issue but does not yield many solutions to problems that require actual discussion.

5. **Accommodating:** A combination of unassertive and cooperative, this style is the opposite of competing. With this style a person lets their own concerns go in order to appease the concerns of another. This style leads to a high degree of self-sacrifice and selfness but can leave an individual feeling unfulfilled in some situations.

While all of these styles have merit in certain situations, understanding how to use each style and when to use them can be difficult. It comes down to understanding the problem-solution format that is associated with different types of conflict (Thomas & Kilmann, 2012). Theatre techniques like improv described above and Stanislavski's action verbs described in the following section can help individuals master this problem-solution format.

While the Thomas-Kilmann model of conflict management styles has been well received, it is not without its critics. Nicotera (1993) critiques the two-dimensional approach used in both of these methods. She asserts that a two-dimensional plotting system (concern for people and concern for production) is too narrow of a measure to try and categorize conflict motives. If there are any number of elements that can lead to the creation of conflict, it makes

sense that there would need to be multiple dimensions of classification. She proposes a new system composed of three, wider ranging dimensions: attention to one's own views, attention to the other's views, and emotional/rational valence. This approach melds well with the principles of Stanislavski's action verbs, which will be discussed later, as their very purpose is to define the objectives of the individuals in a scene, and to establish the emotional elements that the actor is portraying.

The need for this approach was further solidified in a study done by Hastings et al. (2019) where it was noticed that first-year pharmacy school students had a lack of empathy when concerning conflict management. The research team theorized that making students aware of conflict management styles might help lead to an increase in empathy when dealing with conflict. This hypothesis was tested by asking students enrolled in a Patience Centered Skills course to take the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode test. Performance in the class was measured against students' predetermined conflict management style to determine if some conflict management styles had a higher disposition toward empathy than others. The results supported this hypothesis. Students who exhibited a conflict management style of "Compromising" had a higher propensity toward empathy (Hastings et al., 2019). This experiment gives validity to the idea that it is useful and worthwhile to help individuals understand the traits associated with all five of the Thomas-Kilmann conflict management styles. Educating individuals on all conflict management styles gives them multiple angles from which to approach conflict management.

A separate study conducted with the focus of helping law students better understand negotiation techniques revealed similar results. One exception of this study was that it also discovered the benefits that students gained when they were able to understand the conflict management styles of those whom they came into conflict with. Combining knowledge of the

Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument with basic negotiation tactics resulted in the discovery that students had a higher ability for empathy when understanding different conflict management styles. This was because they could better understand the approach being taken by those they were in conflict with. Recognizing and understanding the tactics that a counterpart would use during conflict helped the law students to better visualize the point of view of the opposite party (Brown, 2012).

Dr. Amy Gaumer Erickson, an associate professor at the University of Kansas Center for Research on Learning also agrees with this theory. There are behaviors associated with each of the five conflict management styles on the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument. Knowing the style you are using in a conflict, recognizing the conflict management style of the individual in conflict with, and then responding appropriately to the behaviors assimilated with that style can be very helpful in deescalating conflict (A. Gaumer Erickson, Personal Communication, January 8, 2021). A firm understanding of the actions and motives of all conflict management styles gives student an automatic advantage when they encounter conflict. However, simply seeing different conflict management styles defined on paper is not the same as understanding the actions that make up the styles themselves.

While helpful for an individual to understand their own disposition toward conflict management, the definitions of the five conflict management styles set forth by the Thomas-Kilmann model are at best ambiguous. For instance, how Thomas and Kilmann define “compromising” could vary greatly from how an individual trying to learn about their own style of conflict management might define it. Also, there is an element of emotion (as Nicotera points out) that must be taken into account when dealing with conflict. Conflict management styles can help you frame how to approach a conflict, but they do not address the emotions an individual

might feel when in a conflict. This is what is known as emotional labor, or how a person manages the emotions required to fulfill the requirements of an emotional job (Hochschild, 2012). This ambiguity combined with a need for better understanding of emotional labor makes the conflict management styles set forth by Thomas and Kilmann difficult to understand and even harder for actual application (Nicotera, 1993).

In order to solve this problem, again a theatre concept can be implemented. Just as conflict coaching fits well within a theatrical framework, conflict management styles work equally well with this theatrical method. This is due to their reliance on a clear understanding of the objectives and actions of individuals within the conflict. The critique of the Thomas-Kilmann model draws parallels to the issue once had in the acting community where how an actor would define a desired emotion on stage was different from how a director would define it. The solution proposed by Konstantin Stanislavski was to no longer think of acting in terms of single word emotions, but rather as a series of playable action verbs determined through concrete script work (McGaw et al., 2012).

Stanislavski's Action Verbs

Konstantin Stanislavski was a 19th century, Russian theatre practitioner widely considered to be the father of modern-day theatre acting (Stanislavski & Benedetti, 2010). He earned this title by developing what is known as the “Stanislavski Method” of acting. A large part of his method revolves around the idea of playable actions that a performer can use to bring a scene to life. Stanislavski asserted that all good theatre was centered around conflict. In its simplest form, conflict had to arise between two characters for a scene to be entertaining. The entertainment for the audience is then gathered from watching the conflict play out (Stanislavski & Benedetti, 2010). For instance, think of a scene that is all about two people fighting over an

apple. They are both starving, and a singular apple is all the food left to their disposal. The conflict is set, both characters want the apple, but how do the actors portraying these characters go about playing out the conflict?

Stanislavski believed that the best way to create an entertaining performance was to create a list of playable actions beginning with the preposition “to.” Avoid playing emotions as they can be interpreted differently by everyone, actions however are concrete. Actor A will try “to intimidate, to convince, to scare, etc.” Actor B into giving up the apple. Once a playable action has been chosen, the actor proceeds to act it out on stage. It is important to note that determining the best action comes from reading the context of the world in which the play exists (McGaw et al., 2012). Combining Stanislavski’s style of acting with the way that the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument labels conflict management styles would result in a method that could be used by participants to determine a list of actions associated with each of the conflict management styles. This would make it easier for individuals to utilize any of the five methods when called for by a certain situation.

Scholars Mandy Rees and John Staniunas also raise the point that utilizing Stanislavski’s method helps individuals to better control emotions when in conflict. In the moment, if fully embraced, emotions can feel “thrilling” and “energizing,” but the ultimately lead to confused action on stage (Rees & Staniunas, 2002). This is because emotions are hard to define. They look and are felt differently by each individual. An argument can also be made that when an individual is fully engaged with their emotions, they are not thinking rationally. The goal is not to eliminate emotions entirely, but to understand how to use them correctly and appropriately. Essentially, Stanislavski’s action verbs are trying to teach actors how to utilize their emotions on stage in the same way that Hochschild advocates for higher emotional intelligence to better deal

with situations that require great emotional labor. There is a certain amount of sporadically initiated reaction when emotions are involved. Sometimes this approach is effective, but often it just leads to more confusion. Utilizing Stanislavski's method makes intentions clear to both parties involved.

With the method defined, how does one go about teaching Stanislavski's method to first time practitioners? The most effective way is to have them conduct basic script work on a simple scene prechosen by the instructor. Script work is the process that an actor goes through to understand the world in which they are about to create a character. Actors refer to the script as created by the playwright to find as much information as possible about their character and the world in which they live. If some information appears to be missing, it is the actor's job to fill in the blanks. Things such as character objectives, antagonist objectives, personal history between the two characters, etc. are examples of things an actor determines during script work. Upon completing the script work, an actor should have enough base knowledge about their character and the world of the play to begin successfully utilizing Stanislavski's method (Thomas, 2013).

While this is all useful information for actors, how does any of it apply to conflict management styles? The answer can be found when looking at the similarities between the two disciplines. When students are asked to study conflict management styles, they can gather a base understanding of various conflict management styles and think of possible ways to react based on the conflict being faced by using Stanislavski's action verbs. This task is very similar to an actor having to figure out the objectives of his character, the objectives of those that oppose his character, and ways to deal with the resulting conflict that will be clear and precise. The only difference is that when an actor has to partake in this mental exercise, they have the guidance of the script work they have completed and their knowledge of the Stanislavski method (McGaw et

al., 2012). Students should receive a base understanding of conflict management styles and then be given a scripted conflict to analyze utilizing script analysis and Stanislavski's method.

Example: The Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument asserts that there are five types of conflict styles that individuals use when in conflict (Thomas & Kilmann, 1978). Being able to pick out and understand the motives behind these conflict management styles becomes easier when looking at the conflict scripts from a script analysis viewpoint. (McGaw et al., 2012). If a student starts their analysis of these practice conflict scripts using the basic elements of script analysis, this can lead to a better overall understanding of the world being set up in the practice material. If a student can better understand a character's background and objectives, then determining the necessary type of conflict style becomes easier. Once this has been done, students can begin to utilize Stanislavski's method to compile a list of playable actions that correlate with the five different conflict management styles set forth by the Thomas-Kilmann model. Having this list of playable actions gives students a preexisting resource to draw upon when they are faced with actual conflict.

In summary, through the literature reviewed, it can be determined that in order to have successful adult lives students need to be able to utilize good conflict management. It is important to teach students these skills as they are beginning college as this is when they are most open to new forms of learning involving communication. One of the best ways to educate students in this area is by strengthening their soft skills through hands-on, group training. Thus, the combined method of conflict management training and theatre techniques that I outlined in this chapter has great merit. Giving students training in conflict management and theatre techniques helps them to better communicate with their peers and in turn gives them a higher likelihood of success in both their personal and professional lives.

The next chapter will provide the actual curriculum embodying the synthesis of the conflict management techniques and the theatre techniques discussed. It will include a set of activities that could be conducted at a college freshmen orientation.

Chapter 3- Workshop Example

Based on the gaps in current practices highlighted in Chapter 2, it is clear that further work needs to be done to train college students in conflict management. This work primarily revolves around creating training modules that incorporate soft skills development and use language in their instructions that can be easily understood. These areas will be addressed through the implementation of the theatre techniques discussed in the previous chapter (Improvise Theatre and Stanislavski's Action Verbs), combined with the existing conflict management training processes (Conflict Coaching and Conflict Management Styles), to create a new form of conflict management training workshop for college students that can be used at universities' freshmen orientations.²

This training workshop will be led by a facilitator and consist of three activities. These activities will be divided between two modules and are designed to build soft skills that will in turn help students better manage conflict. Listed in the order they are to be executed, the three activities are: No Doubles 1-20, Improv Freeze, and Create a Scene. The activities build in complexity with the first activity (No doubles 1-20) serving as an easy, introductory exercises to soft skills development, the second (Improv Freeze) serving to get students on their feet and putting their new soft skills to work, and the last (Create a Scene) requiring students to practice actual conflict management through simulated conflict situations. No Doubles 1-20 and Improv Freeze are in Module 1, while Create a Scene is in Module 2. The entire workshop process will

²This curriculum is created with the intent of being used at a freshmen orientation at a traditional 4-year university. Therefore, some changes might be needed in order for this program to work at a non-traditional university. It is also the case that student demographics and student major selection might play a factor in the overall curriculum (e.g., Engineering majors process information differently from Theatre majors). Despite these differences, however, the basic foundation of the curriculum was created using concepts that are useful to all students regardless of demographic. While some changes would need to be made in terms of teaching the curriculum, the core purpose remains the same.

take about three hours with two 10-minute breaks between each activity. Instructions on how to run the workshop and detailed instructions on each activity make up the remainder of this chapter.

Theatre-Based Conflict Management Module 1- Improvisational Acting

Introduction and Basic Rules of Improv

The primary purpose of this module and its included activities is to help college freshmen develop their soft skills through the playing of basic improv theatre games. The module is designed to be facilitated in tandem with a university's freshmen orientation. Students attending college for the first time are in need of soft skills training so that they can better understand how to communicate with others. Improved communication abilities through soft skills development will increase a student's likelihood of successful conflict management when faced with a conflictual situation. Upon completing this training students will be better equipped to deal with conflict due to their heightened soft skills. As the key tenets of this module revolve around improvisational acting, it is important that the facilitator has reviewed the basic rules of improv listed below before actual facilitation.

Basic Rules of Improv

Any successful improv exercise will utilize the improv rules as set forth by Del Close. Del developed these rules during his many years teaching at Second City (Improv Olympics Editors, 2018). Understanding these rules and the definition of improv will be key in teaching this module.

Eleven Rules of Improv

1. You are all supporting actors.
2. Always check your impulses.
3. Never enter a scene unless you are NEEDED.
4. Save your fellow actor, don't worry about the piece.
5. Your prime responsibility is to support.
6. Work at the top of your brains at all times.
7. Never underestimate or condescend to your audience.
8. No jokes (unless it is tipped in front that it is a joke.)
9. Trust... trust your fellow actors to support you; trust them to come through if you lay something heavy on them; trust yourself.
10. Avoid judging what is going down except in terms of whether it needs help (either by entering or cutting), what can best follow, or how you can support it imaginatively if your support is called for.
11. LISTEN

References

Improv Encyclopedia. (2018) Eleven commandments. Improv Encyclopedia. Retrieved from http://improvencyclopedia.org/references/Eleven_Commandments.html

Activity 1- No Doubles 1-20

Purpose of Activity

This activity serves as a warmup/ice breaker for the group. It is a low stake, easy to understand activity that gets all participants engaged. The activity also works as a baseline introduction for soft skills. Students will be able to see the importance and the function of soft skills in real time while participating in the activity. This is essential because students cannot begin to use their soft skills to solve conflict until they are aware of the function that they serve. In the debrief of this activity, the mediator should point out the soft skills that students have used during the activity and tie them to conflict management. This will serve as a segue way into the second activity of this curriculum that deals directly with conflict management. A list of the soft skills gained through this activity are active listening, nonverbal communication skills, and developing a group dynamic.

This activity is based on a variation of an improv game found on Improv Encyclopedia.com. The original source material can be found at the end of this activity.

Student Learning Outcomes

Upon completion of this activity students will be able to:

1. understand and appreciate the importance of soft skills;
2. identify and use soft skills such as active listening and nonverbal communication to develop a group dynamic.

Coordination and Planning Items

- **Module type:** In person
- **Facilitator requirements:** This activity requires only one facilitator. No previous experience in improvisational theatre is required. However, it is important that the facilitator review both the basic rules of improv listed above and the module itself in its entirety to ensure they have a clear understanding of the activity.
- **Total activity time:** 50 minutes
- **Time allocation:**
 - 10 minutes to gather group and explain rules
 - 15 minutes for first round of activity
 - 15 minutes for second round of activity
 - 10 minutes for debrief
- **Maximum number of participants:** In order to allow for active game play and the opportunity for all players to participate, number of participants should be limited to no more than 20. This number will also allow the facilitator the ability to interact with all participants and easily oversee the activity.
- **Room design/set up:** This activity is best played in a large, empty room where participants can stand comfortably together in a large circle. A room with ample acoustics is also helpful as this ensures that all participants can be heard when speaking.
- **Supplies Required:** None

Facilitator Script

The following is a scripted introduction that a facilitator can read in order to welcome the student participants and introduce them to the game:

Hello everyone and welcome to the (Insert your university's name) campus! We are so glad that you are all here with us today. The purpose of this workshop is to help us learn how to better deal with the conflict that can arise between us and those that we encounter in our lives. Who here has ever had a conflict with someone? Raise your hand if this applies to you. (Allow students to respond) Great! Thank you to those that shared. The truth of the matter is that conflict is an inevitable part of life. Whether it be with a coworker, a teacher, a best friend, a significant other, or your parents, at some point, we all have had a conflict with someone. You're all probably thinking, "What does conflict management have to do with college orientation?" Well, knowing how to manage conflict is a highly important skills that can not only help you succeed during your time on campus, but in your everyday lives after college as well. Good conflict management skills help us have better relationships, to be competitive in the world of employment opportunities, and they help us to be overall better human beings. Now I know that conflict can be difficult, but it doesn't have to be! Today we are going to do a few activities that can help you all better manage conflict, and a big part of managing conflict comes from having well developed soft skills. Now I'm sure some of you are wondering, "What are soft skills exactly?" Well don't worry, I didn't know what they were at your age either. Basically, soft skills are the nuanced and unspoken elements of communication. Body language, nonverbal cues, reading the atmosphere of a room, these are all examples of soft skills. All of these things are important parts of conflict management. Today we are going to do a few activities to help you all build your soft skills and in turn, learn how to better manage conflict. Let's start with a game called No Doubles 1-20.

Instructions for No Doubles 1-20

1. Have all participants get together in a large circle. Make sure that everyone stands an arms width apart.
2. Explain to the group that the goal of the activity is to discover the importance of soft skills and to see in real time how they can help accomplish tasks. Emphasize the ideas of active listening, nonverbal communication, and group dynamic building as outlined in the "Student Learning Outcomes" section above.
3. Once everyone is in a circle, explain the rules and instruct them of the deceptively simple goal of the game: Working together, the group must find a way to count to 20. The catch is that no two players can talk at the same time and no discussion of strategies can take place. Participants must speak in random order and players cannot give any direct signal that they are about to speak. If any players speak at the same time (Example: Two players say "5" together) the group must immediately start counting over from 1.
4. As the facilitator, it is your job to help the students work as an ensemble. Encourage them to remain as calm as possible. Instruct them to attempt and breathe naturally and at a consistent pace throughout the duration of the game. Reiterate that remaining calm is key. This is important because in order for

players to utilize their soft skills, as well as to build a group dynamic, all members must find a way to be on the same mental wavelength. Collective breathing and shared sense of calm can help to accomplish this goal.

5. As the game begins the group will struggle to count much higher than the first few digits. After a few failed attempts, pause the game and encourage players to try and use their soft skills. Always refer back to the soft skills discussed in “Student Learning Outcomes.” Remind them to look for the nonverbals of the other players. It is also helpful to remind them that developing a group dynamic is key. This can be done through active listening and trying to develop a rhythm to the group’s counting. Encourage them to watch for nonverbal cues that might signify that a player is about to speak.
6. After a few more rounds with students now using soft skills, the group should find success in counting to 20. Once this happens it is time to make the game a bit more difficult. Instruct all the players to start the game over, but this time with their eyes closed. Taking away sight will require players to fully rely on their soft skills. This is due to the fact that students must now fully rely on the group dynamic that has been created and to actively listen for the rhythm that was created in the first round of play.

Group Debrief

Once the activity is over, bring participants back together and ask them to share about their experiences executing the activity. Work to tie all that is shared back to the importance of soft skills. Again, highlight the elements listed in “Student Learning Outcomes.” Talk about how by using soft skills students were able to develop a group rhythm, and through this rhythm they were able to complete the task of counting to 20 even when the benefit of sight was removed. The point of this activity is that it allows for quick results allowing students to see immediately the importance of soft skills development. Even if students do not successfully count all the way to 20, they should still see improvement from the first few attempts. Regardless of actual number reached at the end, highlight this improvement and connect it with soft skills. To end this first activity, ask students to think about how the soft skills used in this activity could be useful in dealing with conflict. Ask this question at the end so that students will think about how the new skills they have just learned could be applicable to conflicts that may arise in their everyday lives.

References

Improv Encyclopedia. (2018) No doubles 1-10. Improv Encyclopedia. Retrieved from [http://improvenyclopedia.org/games//No Doubles 1-10.html](http://improvenyclopedia.org/games//No_Doubles_1-10.html)

Activity 2- Improv Freeze

Purpose of Activity

This activity serves to get students up on their feet and actually practicing their soft skills and conflict management abilities. Students will gain skills in the areas of reacting and adapting under pressure of time when faced with conflictual situations. As the game requires partner work, students will also receive training in peer listening and reaction. This is done using the tenets of conflict coaching. In conflict coaching a mediator walks participants through simulated conflict situations and helps them to find possible solutions that can then be applied if/when conflict arises in everyday life. Ultimately, Improv Freeze works as a simulated first step toward actual conflict management. Using the soft skills introduced in Activity 1, combined with the guided mediator process utilized in conflict coaching, students are exposed to hypothetical conflict situations that provide them with a game plan for when faced with actual conflict.

Student Learning Outcomes

1. Students will gain skills in reacting and adapting in conflictual situations;
2. Students will be able to identify engaged peer listening and use appropriate conflict reaction;
3. Students will be able to use entry-level conflict management techniques implemented through soft skills.

Coordination and Planning Items

- **Module type:** In person
- **Facilitator requirements:** This activity requires only one facilitator. No previous experience in improvisational theatre is required. However, it is important that the facilitator review both the basic rules of improv listed above and the module itself in its entirety to ensure they have a clear understanding of the activity. Scenarios for game play provided in the “Appendix” section should also be reviewed thoroughly.
- **Total activity time:** 50 minutes
- **Time Allocation:**
 - 10 minutes to gather group and explain rules
 - 30 minutes of game time where every student participates in at least one scenario
 - 10 minutes for debrief
- **Maximum number of participants:** In order to allow for active game play and the opportunity for all players to participate, number of participants should be limited to no more than 20. This number will also allow the facilitator the ability to interact with all participants and easily oversee the activity.
- **Room design/set up:** This activity is best played in a large, empty room where participants can stand comfortably together in a large circle. A room with ample acoustics is also helpful as this ensures that all participants can be heard when speaking.
- **Supplies Required:** A list of participants’ names

Facilitator Script

The following is a scripted introduction that a facilitator can read in order to welcome back the student participants after their break from the Activity 1:

Welcome back everyone! I hope you all are enjoying the workshop so far. Sometimes the best way to learn a new skill is to practice using it in real life situations. Now that we have seen soft skills in action, let's try them out in terms of conflict management. A big part of good conflict management is being able to think quickly on your feet. You need to be able to anticipate where the conflict is going to go and react accordingly to make sure that the situation doesn't elevate. This is done by using your soft skills to correctly interpret what those you may be in conflict with are saying or doing and responding with the most appropriate response possible based on what they have given you. In order to practice this, we are going to play a role-playing game called Improv Freeze! Everyone circle up and I'll explain the rules of the game.

Instructions for Improv Freeze

The point of this game is for students to gain practice dealing with conflict through exposure to hypothetical conflict situations commonly found in everyday life. This is done by having two players (both students attending the workshop) work through possible issues of conflict based on one of the randomly selected conflict scenarios. Review the “Appendix” section for these scenarios. The facilitator will pick two students at the start of the activity and will assign them characters and a scenario (e.g., Scenario: Buying a car, Student 1 Character: Buyer, Student 2 Character: Seller). Once characters and a scenario are assigned, the goal is to work through the conflict. The primary goal is not so much creating an entertaining scene, but rather exposing students to conflict situations and giving them an opportunity to react. Even if they react incorrectly, this will still create valuable experience and provide an example of how to not act in future situations of conflict. Students will have no idea as to the specifics of the scenarios prior to gameplay. This uncertainty serves to simulate the unpredictable nature that comes with conflict. Once the game has started, the facilitator must work to help students keep the game alive and to ensure that all students participate. While the initial players work to create the scene, the facilitator watches and looks for an opportunity to yell “FREEZE!” and bring in new players with a new conflict scenario. The facilitator can replace just one player, or both players. Giving the facilitator the power to freeze and change the game at any given moment helps to further the uncertainty factor. The rationale is that if students are exposed to uncertainty, they will be required to use their soft skills to manage conflict. It is the job of the facilitator to make sure that when a new scene begins, players clearly understand the conflict situation, the characters they will be playing, and that the scene moves toward the idea of conflict resolution.

1. Arrange the group in a circle. Leave enough space in the middle so that two players can create a scene within the circle.
2. Ask for any volunteers to go first. If nobody volunteers, pick two students randomly from your list of names.
3. With your players chosen, move to the middle of the circle, then assign a scenario from your previously created list.

4. The facilitator should live in the scene with the students they are training. Offer suggestions as needed to help keep the scene alive (e.g., feeding the students a line, offering a possible solution to try, encouraging them to embrace their instincts, etc.). This can be done by reminding students of the soft skills discussed in Activity 1 and through highlighting characters and conflict situations as defined in the Appendix below.
5. When the facilitator feels that the scene has progressed enough that the performing student have been able to use soft skills to work toward solving the conflict situation, the facilitator should yell “FREEZE!” They should then tag the initial students out, replacing them with randomly chosen new students, starting a new scene. Scenes should not be longer than a few minutes as they are not supposed to be full conflict coaching sessions. The desired outcome is to expose students to possible conflicts they might see in their lives and help them make the connection between soft skills and managing these conflicts. It is okay to use previous scenarios as long as they are with new players.
6. Let the game progress until every student has had an opportunity to be a part of at least one scene.

Group Debrief

Once the game is completed, gather the students and discuss any discoveries that were made when playing. Talk to students about how they felt in the moment while playing the game. It is highly likely that students will have felt a sense of anxiety while playing the game due to the uncertainty factor involved. This is intentional and serves to simulate anxiety that can arise when faced with conflict. Ask students to walk through their mental process when playing the game. What choices did they make that increased their anxiety? What decisions did they make that decreased their anxiety? Help students to tie anxiety reduction back to the soft skills discussed in Activity 1. For instance, if a student talks about anticipating the actions of a partner by observing their facial expression, point out that this is tied to the soft skill on nonverbal communication. Highlight moments when players showed strong use of soft skills so that students are aware of these positive developments and can continue to improve in this area. It is also beneficial to point out things missed during the activity, giving examples of missed opportunities for soft skills use, highlighting scenes where it seemed conflict increased, etc. Students should walk away from the activity with as much useable information pertaining to soft skills as possible. If done correctly, students should leave with a new set of tools to deal with conflict and better awareness of the use of soft skills.

Appendix

Conflict Situations

1. Buying a new car
Characters: Buyer and Seller
2. Arguing with a roommate about a messy dorm
Characters: Upset Roommate and Messy Roommate
3. Asking a teacher to raise a grade
Characters: Student and Teacher
4. Returning an item to the store without a receipt
Characters: Buyer and Store Clerk
5. Telling a server that your food order is wrong
Characters: Customer and Server
6. Arguing with a classmate over a group project
Characters: Student 1 and Student 2
7. Being accused of stealing your roommate's clothes
Characters: Accused and Roommate
8. Being confronted by your boss over missing work
Characters: Workers and Boss
9. Explaining to your teacher why you were late for class
Characters: Student and Teacher
10. Asking for a raise at work
Characters: Worker and Boss
11. Confronting a noisy neighbor
Characters: Upset Neighbor and Noisy Neighbor
12. Getting in a fender bender with an angry driver
Characters: Driver 1 and Angry Driver 2
13. Telling your parent about getting into a fender bender
Characters: Person in Fender Bender and Parent
14. Fighting with a significant other about where to eat for dinner
Characters: Significant Other 1 and Significant Other 2
15. Asking for a discount on rent
Characters: Renter and Landlord

Theatre Based Conflict Management Module 2- Stanislavski's Action Verbs

Introduction

The primary goal of this module and its activity is to help students recognize different conflict management styles. Working knowledge of the various conflict management styles allow students to have a go-to game plan to draw upon when in conflictual situations. Once these various conflict management styles have been learned, Stanislavski's Action Verbs is introduced to help students learn to think in an objective-driven mindset when dealing with conflict.

“Objective-driven” means to think with ending goals at the front of their mind. Using the action verbs allows students to have clearer actions and objectives when in conflict. Upon completion of this training students will have a better idea of how to deal with conflict due to their new knowledge of conflict management style and training in objective-based thinking when dealing with conflict thanks to Stanislavski's Action Verbs.

Activity 3- Create a Scene

Purpose of Activity

This activity serves as the culmination of the workshop. The primary purpose of the activity is to help students understand different styles of conflict management (set forth by the Thomas-Kilmann model) and to be able to identify when to use them in real life. Through the implementation of Stanislavski's Action Verbs, students should learn to think in an objective-drive fashion, helping them to better deal with conflict by having end goals in mind when dealing with conflict situations.

Student Learning Outcomes

1. Students will be able to identify one's own conflict management style.
2. Students will learn to use different conflict management styles when called for.
3. Students will learn to recognize the conflict management styles of others and how to respond accordingly.
4. Students will learn to use playable actions to increase effectiveness in dealing with conflict and to better communicate emotions.
5. Students will gain practice in solving conflicts between themselves and their peers using soft skills.

Coordination and Planning Items

- **Module type:** In person
- **Facilitator requirements:** This activity requires only one facilitator. No previous experience in improvisational theatre is required, however it is important that the facilitator review both the basic rules of improv listed above and the module itself in its entirety to ensure they have a clear understanding of the activity. A guided script for game play provided in the "Appendix" section should also be reviewed thoroughly.
- **Total activity time:** 70 minutes
- **Time Allocation:**
 - 10 minutes to gather group and explain rules
 - 10 minutes for students to take the Thomas- Kilmann Conflict Management Styles Survey
 - 10 minutes to explain the various conflict management styles with the group
 - 30 Minutes for gameplay and presentation of volunteer student scenes
 - 10 minutes for debrief and closing remarks
- **Maximum number of participants:** In order to allow for active game play and the opportunity for all players to participate, number of participants should be limited to no more than 20. This number will also allow the facilitator the ability to interact with all participants and easily oversee the activity.
- **Room design/set up:** This activity is best played in a large, empty room where participants can stand comfortably together in a large circle. A room with ample acoustics is also helpful as this ensures that all participants can be heard when speaking. Participants will also need space to sit down in order to complete the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Management Styles Survey distributed at the start of the activity.

- **Supplies Required:** Clipboards, Pencils, and paper copies of the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Management Styles Survey. You can purchase the survey at: <https://kilmanndiagnostics.com/overview-thomas-kilman-conflict-mode-instrument-tki/>

Facilitator Script

The following is a scripted introduction that a facilitator can read in order to welcome back the student participants after their break from the Module 1:

We have reached our last activity of the day. Did you all know that there are different types of conflict management styles that people use when dealing with conflict According to conflict research pioneers Kenneth Thomas and Ralph Kilmann there are five different types of conflict management styles: Collaborating, Competing, Avoiding, Accommodating, and Compromising. Thomas and Kilmann created a test that people can take to find out which conflict style they have a natural disposition toward. A huge part of being able to successfully deal with conflict is being able to recognize different conflict management styles so that you can use any of them when a situation calls for a style other than your own. Understanding all the styles also helps you to better understand those that you may come into conflict with. To help us learn these skills, our final activity is going to be called Create a Scene! We have a short, scripted conflict that each of you will act out with a partner. The dialogue will be the same for everyone, but the acting choices and outcome of the scene will vary based on conflict management styles and acting choices made.

Any questions? (Pause and answer any questions) All right, so the first thing we are all going to do is take the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Management Styles Survey. We have a copy for everyone on these clipboards as well as pencils to use when filling the survey out. Once you have completed the survey, figure out your conflict style using the attached rubric. Once you are finished, we will review the survey together. (Pass out the surveys and wait for students to complete them.)

Everyone, done? Great, let's discuss the different types of conflict management styles a bit before going on to the activity. It is just as important to understand all of the conflict management styles so that you can pick the right style for a conflict and understand the style being used by the person you are in conflict with. That way, you can respond appropriately to different styles. (Using the definitions provided by the survey, review the five conflict management styles with students. Answer any questions then proceed to activity.)

Now that we have gone over the survey, come get a copy of the scene from me, and then find a partner. In theatre, it is a rule that you should never play directly into your emotions. Emotions can be confusing and hard to define since we all feel things differently. While it is impossible to take emotions out of conflict management, try to think of the conflict resolution in terms of your goals and the emotions that will be at play as you work toward those goals. Think of your actions in the scene as playable action verbs. I'll give you an example: Two people are fighting over a parking spot. Instead of playing "Anger" toward the character you are in opposition within the scene, play things like "To intimidate," "To flatter," "To bribe," etc. Think of this in terms of solving the conflict in the clearest way possible using defined actions. Attempting to solve

conflict without a plan can lead to confusion and even more conflict between individuals. The purpose of this exercise is to think in terms of clear actions that are driven toward a clearly established objective. Working with a partner, create a scene that lets you both try and solve the conflict by making a list of playable actions. Take into account your conflict management style and your partner's style. Once you get through the scene with your preferred conflict management style, try the scene a second time with one of the other styles. The basic rules will be the same, switching styles will just help you to gain practice in using all the styles

Instructions for Create a Scene

1. Start by passing out copies of the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Management Styles Survey. These should have been prepared in advance of the workshop by placing a copy of each survey on a clipboard along with a pencil. After the surveys have been distributed to students, give them 10 minutes to complete the survey. After 10 minutes, encourage them to finish up and review the conflict management styles with them.
2. Once the different styles have been explained, instruct students to find a partner. Make sure to walk around the room helping students with questions and stepping in to help finding partners when needed.
3. After everyone has a partner, help the students with the process of developing the scene. Working together, students should decide what type of conflict exists in their scene. The script has been kept simple so that any type of conflict can be imposed over the lines. With the conflict established and conflict management styles explained, students should use Stanislavski's Action Verbs to create clear actions that work toward the ending objective of solving the conflict. Walk around and watch each group work through the process. Offer insight when needed or answer questions as they come up. Find three partner groups that feel comfortable and would like to present their scenes to all participants.
4. After 15 minutes, bring everyone back together and introduce your three groups chosen to perform. After each performance ask the performers to talk about their process and to explain why they chose the actions that they did. Once the performers have shared, open things up to questions from the audience. All three of the performance groups should take 5 minutes each, for a total of 15 minutes of presentation.

Debrief

Talk to the students about the importance of conflict management styles. A list of possible questions to ask during this debrief can be found below. Make sure they understand the connection between recognizing their own conflict management styles, the styles of others, and having a knowledge of all the styles. Understanding conflict management styles and understanding how to use the soft skills explored in the previous activities to deescalate conflict should be the key takeaways. Also be sure to highlight the effectiveness of using playable actions in solving conflict. Discuss with students how these playable actions helped guide emotions and lead to better overall communication. To conclude, ask the students if they have any final questions and then answer them accordingly. Thank them for attending and wish them the best of luck on their collegiate journeys.

Questions

1. How did knowing your conflict management style help you in resolving conflict?
2. How did it feel when you tried out different conflict management styles?
3. How did your conflict management style interact with your partner's style?
4. What playable actions did you come up with that you felt worked well in terms of conflict management?
5. What playable actions did you come up with that you felt did not work well in terms of conflict management?
6. Were you able to clearly define an objective for the scene? Did having this objective help you in terms of managing conflict?

Appendix

Guided Script for Create a Scene

Character 1: Hey, what's up?

Character 2: Not much

Character 1: Cool

Character 2: Did you steal my lunch?

Character 1: What? No way!

Character 2: I'm pretty sure you did.

Character 1: Are you saying I'm lying?

Character 2: Well, somebody took it.

Character 1: I don't know.

Character 2: Neither do I.

Character 1: Well, okay, I guess.

Character 2: Okay then.

Chapter 4- Conclusion

Simply stated, conflict is an inevitable part of life. Students just beginning college are particularly prone to conflict due to the already stressful and rapidly changing world that accompanies working toward a college education (Gottlieb et al., 2007). Learning to deal with conflict can make or break an individual in both their personal and professional lives (Brinkert, 2016). Current conflict management training practices that students are provided with prior to attending college have proven to be insufficient. This is due to overly complicated language and a disregard for the development of students' soft skills abilities. A need for a new type of training is clear (Maier et al., 2017).

This new training approach is best highlighted by combining the current conflict resolution practices of Conflict Coaching and Conflict Management Styles with the theatre performance practices of Improvisational Theatre and Stanislavski's Action Verbs. The combination of these four techniques creates a new and easy to understand form of training that can be easily understood by all and places an appropriate emphasis upon soft skills development. In Chapter 2, the need for soft skills development, as well as the importance of a new curriculum aimed at college students, was clearly stated. Soft skills development was required so that students had the skills necessary to carry out these practices in real life. This rationale for new curriculum was shown through the holes in the current training approaches associated with Conflict Coaching and Conflict Management Styles. These holes related to a lack of soft skills development that made the methods unrealistic for real life application. The solution of implementing the theatre techniques of Improvisational Theatre and Stanislavski's Action Verbs was justified through a thorough examination of the techniques and clear explanation of their advantages (easier to understand language and composition that included soft skills

development) in rectifying lacking areas. Chapter 3 provided an actual workshop consisting of how these new techniques would look like if conducted at a university's freshmen orientation. Clear instructions consisting of easy-to-understand language were provided so that layman facilitators and students alike could easily access the curriculum. Notes were provided within the curriculum that would allow the facilitator to see where instances of conflict management and soft skills development were being utilized, allowing them to point out these instances to students for maximum recognition of their impact. While this new curriculum is a step in the right direction, there is still more that needs to be done in order to measure its full impact and efficacy.

Future Directions

There are three primary directives for future research concerning this project. First, actual implementation will need to take place. Once the curriculum has been tested in the field, appropriate changes can be made if necessary, based upon the results of the field test. Second, a proper assessment tool would need to be developed to determine the educational effectiveness of the curriculum in terms of helping students learn more about its proposed concepts. This could be accomplished by a survey given before and after sessions of the workshop. Questions on the survey should relate to students' prior knowledge of soft skills development and conflict management. Last, the long-term effects of how well this approach helps students deal with conflict in their everyday lives would need to be measured. This could be accomplished by gathering a number of students who have completed the training and interviewing them during their time attending college. During the interviews, data on if and how students were actually able to put skills taught by the workshop into practice can be gathered. Through the combination

of the three next steps described, the overall efficacy and practicality of this new approach to conflict management education can be documented and adjusted accordingly.

Final Thoughts

College can be an overwhelming and seemingly insurmountable challenge for students (Gottlieb et al., 2007). Often, having to deal with conflicts that arise from everyday life on top of the pressures of college are too much for students. Furthermore, not learning good conflict management can impact the lives of students long after college, negatively affecting their adult lives. In creating this new type of conflict management training, this problem can be alleviated and students can focus on learning and thriving in this new chapter of their lives. It is through learning to better manage conflict that students learn to become smarter, more productive, and happier members of society. It is my hope that creation of this module will lead to a future generation of college students less inhibited by conflict.

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