

CONFLICT RESOLUTION IN TEAM TEACHING

A CASE STUDY IN INTERDISCIPLINARY TEACHING

Elayne J. Shapiro and Carol J. Dempsey

Abstract. The authors discuss the challenges of creating an integrated, interdisciplinary team-taught course. This case study focuses on conflict arising from interdependency, when interdisciplinary teams determine course content and negotiate identity, relationship, and process issues. Although no formulaic solutions can resolve such conflicts, the study makes suggestions that can help achieve integration and collaboration when disciplines join forces.

Keywords: *collaboration, conflict, interdisciplinary, team teaching*

Conditions for conflict in team teaching are rife. Conflict is “the interaction of interdependent people who perceive incompatibility and the possibility of interference from the others as a result of this incompatibility” (Folger, Poole, and Stutman 2005, 4). Team teaching encompasses a range of configurations in which the degree of interdependency varies. At one end of the continuum, instructors may modularize the course so that different instructors assume responsibility for dif-

ferent units and retain near autonomy. At the other end of the continuum, instructors may integrate subject and pedagogy, thereby maximizing interdependence. Although many configurations of team teaching exist, this case study focuses on an interdisciplinary team-taught course in which two individuals, each with her own teaching style, took two courses, each with her own goals and objectives, and united them into one course, which they taught in a three-hour block. Wilmot and Hocker (2001) maintain that disparate goals with respect to content, process, identity, and relationship contribute to conflict. In this article, we first describe the content issues that affected the design of the course and its challenges. Next, we describe the

process, identity, and relationship issues that created potential for conflict as we negotiated the teaching of the class, and finally, in light of the challenges, we look at student perceptions regarding how well integration and collaboration in the class succeeded. Lessons from this case study may be valuable to others who embark on integrated team-taught courses. Cognizance of potential pitfalls created by interdependence may avert conflict.

Issues in Course Design

Researchers acknowledge the importance of interdisciplinary courses, in general, because they help students understand the challenging issues of our time from multiple perspectives (Davis 1995; Klein 1990). Momentum for interdisciplinary courses at our university derived from three sources. First, in 2002, we redesigned our undergraduate core curriculum, so that every student, regardless of major, would be able to participate in the core. At the heart of the new core lay a series of questions undergraduates would address through the lens of multiple disciplines over the span of four years:

- Who am I? Who am I becoming? Why am I here?
- How does the world work? How could the world work better?
- How do relationships and communities function? What is the value of difference?
- What is the role of beauty, imagination, and feeling in life?

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- Who or what is God? How can one relate to God?
- What is the good life? What can we do about injustice and suffering?

Designers of the core intended that every student would have the opportunity to reflect on these questions from a variety of perspectives and make connections among the disciplines. Thus, interdisciplinary classes made sense in their explicit purpose of drawing connections between disciplines using multiple lenses and, hence, facilitating the goal of the new core.

A second motivation for creating interdisciplinary courses was pragmatic. Students in our professional schools (engineering and nursing, in particular) require a large number of courses in the major. Without sacrificing breadth or depth, the university wanted to help its students meet professional requirements while graduating in four years. Courses that could fulfill two requirements would enable students in the professional schools to participate in the core with students in the College of Arts and Sciences.

Beyond the new core and pragmatic reasons, momentum for a certain kind of interdisciplinary course derived from a third source. *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* challenged Catholic universities to raise ethical, theological, and social justice issues across the academy.¹ Our university responded to these challenges with the introduction of Theological Perspective (THEP) classes. THEP classes provide three credits of a core class and fulfilled the requirement for an upper-division theology credit, but met only three hours per week. Faculty were encouraged to create such interdisciplinary courses. The course we created combined upper-division theology credit with a social science credit in communication studies, but the lessons learned would be valuable to any interdisciplinary team.

Course Overview

Our course was titled “Grace in the Wilderness, Conflict in the Bible.” For each week’s three-hour evening class, students were assigned a biblical text, a chapter in their conflict text, and outside readings over which they took weekly quizzes. For a semester project, students

divided into self-selected, five-to-seven person teams, chose a current conflict, and completed a four-phase project. Phase one, which was awarded a group grade, included an extensive conflict map; phase two, for which students received an individual grade, required each group member to take one of the stakeholder’s positions. Phase three involved individuals writing a theological reflection piece from the stakeholder’s viewpoint; they received individual grades. In the last phase, the entire group gave a fifteen-minute presentation of its work with possible solutions for the conflict.

The agenda for weekly classes began with a quiz. Next, the theology professor gave a lecture on the sociohistorical, literary, and theological perspective of the week’s reading. After taking a break, students came back and participated in small-group exercises for the conflict analysis of the biblical story. Students worked in their semester project teams during the third portion of the evening, and in the last five minutes, the theology professor provided a summation. Although the course can be succinctly described in two paragraphs, its simplicity belies the complexity involved in its creation. We turn now to the content (design), process, identity, and relationship issues we faced in creating this course.

Course Design

According to Seabury and Barrett (2000), the best teams typically form from shared interest in a topic. We, however, were recruited to create an interdisciplinary class because the professional schools were lacking. The topic for our course emerged through a conversation about what we had in common and what our department teaching schedules would allow us to do.

One tenet of interdisciplinary teaching is that for content to become integrated (not just serial), colleagues have to teach each other about their subject (Davis 1995). Content integration is a continual process. For us, it began when the theology professor clarified that her area was biblical studies, analysis of texts, and not theology per se. Her words cued the communication professor to think about biblical texts as the meeting ground for the disciplines because biblical texts could

be used as case studies for conflict. We settled on the topic of “conflict in the bible” as the nexus of our course.

As we began these early discussions about the course’s content, we were also moving forward with respect to our team’s identity, relationship, and process issues because our relationship prior to this enterprise was more friendly than professional. Regarding identity issues, we had to assimilate each other’s notion of who we each were as teachers, as researchers, and as experts in our fields. With respect to relationship, we had to figure out how we would negotiate power and control as we made the many decisions that were required to create a course. At the same time, we needed to develop a process: How often could we meet? How would we structure our meetings? How would we make our decisions? How would we handle our conflicts with each other when we disagreed? How would we negotiate our interdependence?

Scarce resources exacerbate conflict, and time was a scarce resource. It was and remains a huge constraint in the trajectory of course development. Time is required when two people have to make joint decisions. Time is a factor in determining what day and hour two people can teach together during a given semester. Time is a consideration in deciding when teachers can be spared from the regular line-up of courses they are scheduled to teach. Time is necessary to monitor the class’s progress. The theology professor was on a Monday, Wednesday, Friday rotation, and the communication professor typically taught Tuesdays and Thursdays. Each of our schedules was part of our department’s web of courses. To bridge our different schedules we decided to teach the class in the evening.

In our course, no decision was made unilaterally. After agreeing to a topic, we had to choose which biblical texts to study. Were each of us teaching alone, no conversation about text suitability would be needed. As Davis (1995) found, most teachers experience frustration with the loss of autonomy that interdisciplinary teaching involves. For us it was not only less autonomy, but also more time investment for decision making and potential for our own conflicts to emerge with each other as we began this journey.

Given how little we knew of each other's disciplines at this time, we both operated with limited information. Neither of us knew what biblical texts would serve each other's purposes. The communication professor generated a list of conflict topics and weighed stories by their richness for analysis using these topics. Similarly, the theology professor chose stories that looked at intrapersonal conflict, interpersonal conflict, and conflict with God. Societal conflict was not the focal point of the stories we chose, although they were background circumstances for some. Not all stories worked equally well for each other's purposes. For example, the theology professor proposed we use a passage from the prophet Jeremiah because his message of social justice was so important. The communication professor's perception of Jeremiah was of one long tirade and a terrible example of communication conflict behavior. This was a juncture in which our content goals could diverge. Potential for relationship conflict was imminent because there was no precedent on how to resolve the difference. Hearing how closely her colleague identified with Jeremiah's message, the communication professor re-read the text and reconsidered what the text might offer to the study of communication and conflict. Eventually, she decided to use the text to talk about defensiveness and its role in conflict. This type of conversation, however, accompanied every text suggested for inclusion in the course.

Beginning this way, we set up a pedagogical challenge that would continuously haunt us: making the class *interdisciplinary*. Barisonzi and Thorn (2003) identify one of the advantages of interdisciplinary teaching: fostering students' ability to draw connections between the disciplines. At this early point, however, we did not know what kinds of connections our students would be making from each of our disciplines because we did not know what the connections would look like. Team teaching has been compared to a marriage (Seabury and Barrett 2000). In the early stages of our course development, however, our team looked less like a marriage and more like in-laws from opposite sides of the family.

Our logical next step was to craft our syllabus. We shared with each other our

departments' expectations for knowledge, skills, and values that we were expected to teach. Being task-oriented with limited meeting time, we cut and pasted these elements into our syllabus, but did not spend much time translating for each other the implications for our joint work. Up to this point, we were operating at what Burton (2001) identified as thematic integration: two subjects are connected by a theme with limited connections between them.

Wiggins and McTighe (2001) recommend that in starting course design one begins with overarching "essential questions." Two consuming questions were "How might our disciplines work together to enhance each other? Could the whole be greater than the sum of the parts?" Our interdisciplinary questions were not etched out before we began teaching the class, but have emerged as we taught the class. Among our questions are:

- What moments of grace, if any, do we find in the conflicts of the biblical stories?
- To what extent do the elements that exacerbate conflict make grace more remote?
- To what extent can effective conflict-management facilitate grace?
- How do the social, historical, and theological elements of a story help explain the stakeholders' behaviors in the conflict?
- How might the study of conflict contribute to understanding biblical text?
- How is conflict interaction shaped by the culture and climate of the situation?
- How do gender-related issues play out in conflict in the ancient Near Eastern world and the Judeo-Christian culture?
- How can the lens of conflict, mediation, and theology be used to understand current conflicts of the world community?

The theology discipline required that students grasp the stories' historical, social, literary, and theological implications. We used the historical and social elements to underscore an important feature in the study of conflict: perspective taking. Different stakeholders have differing goals which, understood in their own context, justify behavior. By couching analysis in the historical and social background, some of the principles important to the

study of conflict played out on the theology side. However, as Burton points out, "not all content in any discipline can be integrated with the content in any other discipline" (2001, 19), and indeed, for us, our connections are periodic.

One way we have had of forcing integration is the last five minutes of class, which we labeled the "Grace in the Wilderness" moment. At this time, the theology professor drew out from the students what the moment of grace might be in an otherwise conflictual story.

After framing the overarching questions, Wiggins and McTighe (2001) recommend that course designers then consider the evidence students will use to show they can understand and answer those questions. To that end, we wanted a project that would bring students to Burton's (2001) second and third levels of integration: knowledge integration (in which connective relationships are established between the knowledge skills in two or more disciplines) and learner-initiated integration, the highest level, "when learners discover connections on their own by utilizing previous knowledge and independently integrating new information" (20).

We must emphasize how difficult designing such a project was, given limited integration. We adopted the project described in the overview that had been developed in the communication professor's regular conflict class. We added the theological reflection paper, which served both theology and communication. For the theology side, it provided an opportunity for a topical application of theology to a current event; from the conflict side, the theology piece provided criteria that students might use to view various stakeholders' positions.

In designing an integrated course, the day-to-day format must be addressed. We looked around for models we might use. Seabury and Barrett (2000) recommend that as teams form, they observe a team-taught course. Although two other team-taught classes are taught at our university, we were not able to visit those classes. Following the advice of Letterman and Dugan (2004), however, we did interview those faculty members. Their approaches involved dialogue and argumentation with each other in the course of any given ses-

sion. To see what might work for us, one of us was able to visit the other's class and observed that we had very different teaching styles. Different teaching styles may make class time more interesting for the students because of variety, but it can also be a source of conflict in deciding how a class period will evolve. We decided that, given our different styles, and given the varying goals of our disciplines, we would divide the evening in half. The class met from seven to ten, so we had to negotiate which of us would go first.

the main project had a rubric crafted with numbers, one colleague acquiesced and we used numerical grading. However, it was a source of discomfort. The theology professor experienced a love/hate relationship with the term project. On one hand, she liked what it accomplished with respect to our objectives and its use of theological reflection, but she found great frustration with the potpourri of topics.

Class size also contributed to design issues. The cap for this course was set at sixty students. Given the amount of

the role of observer, through which we were able to give each other feedback on how the process was working, and the role of resource person for each other and for students working on their projects. Wentworth and Davis (2002) suggest other roles that can help integrate material. First, we can model learning: the non-presenting faculty member does all the reading assignments on time, asks questions in a respectful way, and offers alternative ideas for genuine discussion as well as listening carefully to the presenter and students. "A model learner does not dominate or engage in an exclusive dialogue with the presenter, play 'one upmanship' games . . . to maintain his or her position" (Wentworth and Davis, 28). Other roles, which we have not yet explored, include co-lecturer, co-discussion leader, and case co-facilitator. Any of these could be feasible in our class structure.

Finally, we would echo Letterman and Dugan's (2004) advice with respect to course procedures. Establishing expectations for students and class policies in writing at the first meeting of the class can mitigate students playing one professor against another. Keeping in mind when interacting with students that one is part of a team is essential. Conferring with one's co-teacher before responding to complaints helps both instructors negotiate student-teacher interfaces. Most importantly, meeting regularly and maintaining close communication reduces conflict (Letterman and Dugan).

Benefits

In discussing design issues, many of the challenges in teaching this course have been raised. From the theology perspective, our term project and its focus on contemporary conflicts provided a natural bridge to consider understanding "right relationships" among all things. Justice, compassion, integrity, and the holiness of all life are the themes around which our stories revolve, but they also can be a benchmark by which to measure contemporary conflict. From the conflict side, many of the biblical texts made excellent case studies for analysis. Moreover, the theological reflection piece provided criteria against which various solutions could be measured. Ivanitskaya

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Theology prevailed because of its intense focus on the story. Given that during the first half of class students were primarily in a listening, question-answering mode, the communication professor opted for more involvement from students, through small-group exercises, for the second half of the evening. This anecdote highlights how interdependence of two instructors affects autonomy.

With respect to conflict resolution, both parties' overriding goal of making the class a collaboration, but one which honored their differences, motivated them to work through areas where their content and identities clashed. At the relationship level, both were committed to shared power. The subject matter made it clear that avoiding conflict might only serve to escalate it at a later point. So despite one professor's preferred conflict style being avoidance and the other's preferred style confrontation, both teachers worked at raising contentious issues. They listened to the other's story and looked for ways to meet both sets of needs.

Grading raised other design issues. One colleague was accustomed to letter grades; the other used numbers. Because

writing we gave our students and the large size of the class, we grappled with how to accomplish the grading load. In their case study, George and Davis-Wiley (2000) describe sitting together to read papers, consulting each other, and grading together. Although that helped their inter-rater reliability, we did not have the time. We decided we would each grade half of the papers, but would try to establish inter-rater reliability before grading our half. We never had enough time to get inter-rater reliability. Hopefully, as we continue to teach this course, we will be able to remedy this problem using George and Davis-Wiley's method or by statistically normalizing the scores.

Given the size of the class, we were challenged by how to motivate students to keep up with the reading without increasing our already-heavy grading schedule. Pragmatically, we opted for weekly ten-point quizzes aimed merely at the content level of knowledge.

In designing this class, we needed to work out what our roles would be during instruction. The first semester we divided the teaching task, and each listened as the other went through her paces. We played

et al. (2002) point out that an advantage of interdisciplinary approaches is that they can “develop students’ competence in making the connections between seemingly unrelated domains” (101). Bakken, Clark, and Thompson (1998) point out that team teaching allows instructors to model collaboration techniques. In the context of our subject matter, collaboration was especially important. Students used interpretive tools from theology (societal norms and historical dimensions of each story) as well as social science concerns (how power, identity, and conflict processes impact outcomes).

From a collegial perspective, as Davis (1995) suggests, we each gained new knowledge about the other’s subject area; there was some exchange of new pedagogy; we learned more about team process; and there was social value in the friendship gained. Moreover, when we began this class, each instructor worried about accomplishing her discipline’s goals and objectives. As we have taught the class, we have relaxed some of our concerns. We are seeing evidence in student performance and student writing that our goals are being met, and our concern for each other’s objectives has been nourished.

Julia Klein (1990) describes some of the opportunities that interdisciplinary courses can offer students: a wider knowledge base for students to draw on, a wider variety of design, teaching, and assessment methods, a wider personality base from which students can find compatibility, an atmosphere of risk and experimentation that tends to generate involvement. Some of the comments our students have made about the class in their evaluations suggest they are experiencing these opportunities:

- “The fact that there are two of you helps clear up ‘fuzzy’ topics.”
- “When we get into meaningful discussions about the Bible text and the conflict text, it helps me fully understand things.”
- “The structure of the class (group presentations and group work) is effective.”
- “Both professors connect the material with great examples and insight.”
- “The thorough discussion of the material and relating the two different topics to one another really helps the material sink in.”

Assessment of Student Learning

According to Field, Lea, and Field (1994) appropriate assessment involves taking a developmental perspective, applying multiple strategies, combining qualitative and quantitative measures, and devising locally designed measures tied to local goals. Currently, we have six assessment measures we are using as informal assessment measures: weekly quizzes, group presentations of the biblical stories, small-group discussion of the conflict elements in the biblical stories, the semester project, student evaluations, and group presentations. Weekly quizzes primarily show that students keep up with the reading. Regarding the weekly presentation of the biblical stories, with the exception of one group, all the groups this semester have met our informal benchmarks established by the theology professor. In subsequent semesters, we may develop a form that allows us to more formally assess our criteria. Group discussion of conflict variables within the stories have been “sampled” by faculty as they drop in on groups addressing issues and applications that have been assigned. In addition to this observational assessment, we also have remarks students have made on their evaluations. Some of the comments that support our observations include:

- “The group work that has discussion about the material helps me to retain the information. The weekly quizzes make me prepare for class. The class discussions help solidify the concepts.”
- “The quizzes before class and the in-class lectures have been extremely helpful in retaining information.”
- “Engaging us in conversations, making us use the information we have learned has been helpful, so have quizzes, so we have to read.”
- “I like breaking into groups and discussing the issues. It really helps to make connections between the texts.”
- “Assigning students to go over Bible stories in class is helpful, especially for understanding our particular story. The group work helps to apply the conflict principle to real life. The grace in the wilderness moment is cool.”

Using criteria that require students to demonstrate the ability to explain conflict

from multiple perspectives, we have some evidence from the semester project that students are competent in their ability to analyze conflict from a variety of viewpoints. Our informal evidence leads us to believe we are on the right track.

At the end of the semester, we administered Davis’s Perception of Integration Survey (1995, 125) that measures student perceptions of integration in the class. The scale consists of six questions, each with a five-point Likert scale, to assess their perceptions regarding topics such as evidence of collaboration in planning and success in integrating the subject content. Forty-five students took the survey, twenty-two men and twenty-three women. Of the students, seventeen were in engineering, seventeen in communication studies, three in business, one in nursing, and the remainder in the College of Arts and Sciences. Results were quite encouraging.

The mean for the entire scale was 3.9, with 5.0 representing strong agreement of evidence of collaboration. Given that most professors in Davis’s (1995) study felt they fell short of achieving integration, we are pleased with this result after teaching the course only twice. Davis reports that content gets more integrated over time, and we expect that will happen with additional opportunities to teach and reflect. We also asked students, “Compared to other courses, taught by one faculty member and based on a single discipline, how did this course rank for capturing interest?” The mean for this question was 3.6, and the mode was 4.0, suggesting that for most students, this course captured their interest.

In sum, despite or because of our awareness of content, relationship, identity, and process challenges in creating this course, evidence suggests we have made good progress toward our goal of a team-taught, integrated interdisciplinary class.

Conclusion

No formulaic solutions can resolve conflict that invariably arises in creating a team-taught interdisciplinary course. Understanding how and when interdependencies can create an environment fertile for conflict may assist instructors in planning courses. Integrating the subject matter of two or more disciplines may

benefit students, but integration increases interdependency. Proactive attention may minimize negative consequences. Knowing that content, relationship, identity, and process differences are inevitable may be useful for diagnosis when interdependency sparks tension. Careful listening to team members' perspectives is certainly a starting point for resolving conflict. Keeping in mind super-ordinate interests may help move parties from becoming entrenched into locked positions. Finally, creative problem-solving that is attuned to the content and identity issues and mindful of the process and relationship issues can help achieve integration and collaboration when two disciplines join forces.

NOTE

1. *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* was a document issued by Pope John II and discussed how the structure and life of Catholic colleges and universities should reflect their Catholic identity.

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