

## Conflict Resolution and Academic Library Instruction

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Conflict is unfortunately a constant in the world. From the largest affairs of international politics to the everyday matters of work and family life, disputes between individuals are a regular theme. As individuals, we seek ways to resolve disputes to both make life easier and also to help us get our own way. As a result, a body of knowledge has developed relating to conflict resolution.

Although it may surprise many, libraries are organizations that are prone to conflict. Despite the neatly organized collections of books in the pleasant building with nicely attired library staff ready to help patrons, conflict is occurring on a daily basis. There are many sources of conflict including disputes between staff and management, between the library and vendors, between patrons, between patrons and staff, etc. The library manager is repeatedly required to address concerns that are both serious and minor.

The provision of library instruction is an area that generates a great deal of conflict. While all libraries engage in teaching, academic libraries tend to be the only ones who as a matter of course offer regular and in-depth instructional programming for patrons. Hence, the conflicts created by library instruction tend to be unique to libraries in higher education. These problems manifest in many ways in and out of the classroom including friction between librarians and faculty, between librarians and students, and between library staff. Many of these conflicts will be a surprise to library managers who have not had first-hand experience managing a library instruction program and it requires effort to successfully engage in conflict resolution when it occurs in this area.

### Overview of Conflict Resolution

The heart of conflict resolution is the management of conflict. *The Encyclopedia of Sociology* (1992) wrote, "Conflict theory explains social structure and changes in it by arguing that actors pursue their interests in conflict with others and according to their resources for social organization" (p. 288). Conflict can occur from almost any circumstance when the desires and goals of two people clash. It can range from small personal interactions to war between sovereign nations.

Deutsch (1973) recognized that several factors underlie conflict. These include issue control, issue rigidity, and issue centrality. The more important an issue is to someone (and how much they desire to control it) may ultimately decide how severe the conflict will become. The hardest conflicts to solve are those between disputants who have firmly held

viewed on issues that are central to their lives.

Conflict resolution is the name to a body of knowledge which has been developed to deal with conflict in the world and the workforce. Inger (1991) wrote, "Conflict resolution is a constructive approach to interpersonal and intergroup conflicts that helps people with opposing positions work together to arrive at mutually acceptable compromise solutions." (p. 1). The main idea is to allow people (or nations) to resolve difference peacefully in ways that allows for everyone to save face.

There are two approaches to resolving conflict through conflict resolution. One is to allow the disputants to work together to solve their own problem. This can be as simple as the two sides agreeing to compromise or finding a creative alternate solution together. The other approach to conflict resolution is to bring in a third party to help the disputants reach a resolution. This can entail mediation, arbitration, or in some cases (according to the *Encyclopedia of Psychology*) relationship therapy.

Regardless of what method of conflict resolution is tried, all emphasize common themes. These include encouraging active listening, cooperation, acceptance of differences, and creative problem solving. The ideal is to have the disputants being able to summarize the view of the other party and to be empathic to them. This can then lead to compromises that give each party some of what each desire in the situation.

Conflict resolution skills can be taught. Deutsch (2001) listed several that he believed were important. These included being able to find common ground with others, being able to re-frame conflict as a mutual problem, being able to listen actively, empathic role reversal skills, and impulse control. He also listed the ability to generate feasible solutions as a learnable skill.

Personality is an important part of learning to resolve conflict. Friedman (2000) noted that individuals handle conflict based on their own personality characteristics that act to increase and decrease stress. Gilbert (2003) wrote that the Kahler Model claims that there are six different base-personality types each of which handles stressful situations in different manners. Deutsch (2001) wrote that, "People are sometimes more able to manage conflicts successfully in certain types of situations than in others, with certain people, and about certain types of issues" (p. 3).

In education, there have been many attempts to introduce conflict resolution in schools. Inger (1991) examined a variety of conflict resolution programs being used in American schools and reported that the programs were successful in

raising student awareness of conflict and reducing fights. Girard (1995) argued that there was a lack of evaluative studies of the impact of conflict resolution on schools. She noted however that, "The full benefits of conflict resolution may depend on the inclusion of this subject in the preservice curriculum; more comprehensive training; support of teachers, administrators, and parents at sites..." (p. 3). The lack of training was also noted by Inger (1991) when she wrote, "Inservice teacher training for these programs comes from outside consultants is limited; as a result, teachers are not trained in conflict resolution as extensively as they are in their subject areas" (p. 4).

### **Conflict Resolution in Library Literature**

Surprisingly, there are not a lot of articles in the library journals that deal specifically with conflict resolution. A search of the database Library Literature in March 2005 resulted in only 14 hits for the phrase conflict resolution. Of these, many of the matches were reviews for books on the topic with no direct relationship to librarianship. Of course, there are many articles on conflict and how to deal with it in libraries indexed. A search on the phrase problem patrons brings up 86 hits alone. However, only a couple of articles directly reference and discuss the formal discipline of conflict resolution. As both Girard (1995) and Inger (1991) noted that educators are in need of training in conflict resolution, it is reasonable to theorize that librarians are also in need of training in this area. The lack of librarian awareness of conflict resolution theory probably explains why so few articles are appearing in library journals on the topic.

One library article which discusses conflict resolution in a library setting is by Lux (2000). In it, she describes the problems in communication and conflicts that arose after the reunification of Germany following the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. Two libraries in Berlin (the American Memorial Central Library in West Berlin and the Berlin Municipal Library in East Berlin) merged and some serious conflicts immediately arose. Libraries in democratic Germany were operated in a radically different manner than those of communist Germany. Dealing with patrons, personnel issues, and communication styles all differed which caused conflict. Lux wrote, "The frank, highly critical and aggressive tone which had been used in discussions in the Western half the city for many years alienated and was rejected by colleagues from the East" (p. 23).

Lux noted that more than ten years after the merge that some conflict was still continuing. However, the library staff had made large strides by learning to empathize with the needs of their colleagues from different backgrounds. The administration of the library also worked to be as neutral as possible in cultural disputes so that it could more effectively arbitrate while engaged in conflict resolution.

Weaver-Meyers (2002) wrote an article which recounted the more than decade-long conflict over faculty status for librarians at the University of Oklahoma in the 1990s. There was an attempt made by the University President to strip librarians of faculty status. This was ultimately opposed by the Faculty Senate as most faculty on campus feared this was a bad precedent that could weaken faculty power. However, the real con-

flict arose in the library as librarians picked different sides of the issue. Many of the librarians (particularly those who had yet to face a tenure decision) liked the idea of eliminating the publishing requirement that came with faculty status. Many of the other librarians fought staunchly to push back any attempt to strip the librarians of their faculty status.

The conflict within the University of Oklahoma Libraries took almost a decade to resolve. As the librarians were divided on the issue, it made it difficult for the university administration to find a workable compromise. In the end, the librarians were divided into two separate groups with some librarians retaining faculty status and others opting for a professional staff position. Despite this, the day-to-day activities of the library continued. Weaver-Meyers wrote, "Library committees met, searches were conducted, reports were generated by librarians working together, even though they otherwise were actively warring on the faculty status issue" (p. 32).

Conflict resolution was attempted repeatedly during the faculty status crisis at the University of Oklahoma Libraries. Weaver-Meyers noted that third-party intervention was attempted, cooperative activities in the libraries continued, and a creative compromise solution was ultimately implemented. In particular, the arbitration attempts of the Faculty Senate was noted as being extremely helpful in getting an outside but motivated party to help each side reach a compromise.

### **Conflict and Library Instruction**

There are a variety of ways that conflict can arise in library instruction. These problems can manifest in and out of the classroom including friction between librarians and faculty, between librarians and students, and between library staff. Many of these conflicts will be a surprise to new instruction librarians and library managers who have not had to manage a library instruction program. It requires effort to successfully engage in conflict resolution when it occurs in this area.

One area of conflict is between librarians and faculty who teach classes. There are several areas that can lead to conflict. These include disputes over what to teach, how to construct a good library assignment, and whether a faculty member is entitled to reserve a library classroom.

Most library instruction in academic libraries is requested by a faculty member so that a librarian can instruct a class on library research in the subject of the course. The instruction is usually a one-time occurrence and it is normally conducted in the library. The librarian usually has a fairly strong opinion on what he is going to teach and how he should teach it. There can be surprise when the faculty member dictates another approach to library instruction. Sometimes this conflict can be discovered in advance by discussions between the librarian and the faculty member but sometimes it is not revealed until the faculty member begins interrupting and contradicting the librarian in the middle of a lesson!

If a faculty member insists that students be taught how to use microfilm copies of the newspaper even if the same resource is available in an easier to use and access online form, what is the librarian to do? Whose classroom is it anyway? Does the li-

brarian have the academic freedom to teach the subject as he sees fit or is the librarian merely a guest in the faculty member's course who must follow the desires of a faculty member even if the faculty member is wrong in the librarian's opinion?

This can also happen with library assignments designed by faculty members. In preparing to teach a library instruction session, the librarian may acquire a copy of the library assignment to help prepare instruction for a course. The librarian may discover that the assignment is lacking in many ways. For example, it may have wrong information on it, suggest bad research strategies, or require the use of tools that no longer exist or have been replaced by superior resources. Many faculty members will be grateful for the advice of the librarian on an assignment but others will take umbrage at having their work critiqued by a librarian. Yet, poor assignments need to be addressed or they will result in needless effort by both students and library staff as they struggle with the flawed assignment.

Another faculty-librarian conflict can occur when faculty members desire to use library classrooms for their courses. They may have no intention of conducting library instruction but instead just want to use the library classroom as a convenience. They might want to meet once or have the room for the entire semester. The more attractive a library classroom is, the more likely such a request is going to be. A new library with beautiful computer mediated classrooms is going to get a lot of these sorts of requests.

The nature of library instruction though requires that library classrooms be left open for librarian use. Most faculty don't make a request for library instruction until a few weeks before the desired date. If a room has already been booked by another faculty member for non-library instruction use, the library instruction session may never happen as librarians usually don't have other classroom options. If library classrooms are routinely booked for non-librarian use, a library instruction program will suffer. Yet, many faculty members will be angry when they are told that a library classroom is unavailable to them. They do not understand why they can not have the room a month in the future if no one else has spoken for it yet.

Another area of conflict in library instruction is between librarians and students. This also can take many forms. Many students do not see the need for library instruction as they personally have no need for the information at the moment. Others will not take the library instruction session seriously and may even engage in disruptive behavior. Regardless, the student is rarely accountable to the librarian meaning that many students feel they can generate conflict risk free.

Librarians have reputations for being friendly, available, and ready to help when the patron needs it. Students sitting in library instruction sessions know this. Many assume that this means they can ignore the librarian, engage in conversation with other students, or surf on the Web during class. After all, if the student fails to learn the information in class, they can always go and ask for help at the Reference Desk when they

need it.

Much to the surprise of many new instruction librarians, some students will directly engage in disruptive activities to "liven" up class. This is rare in older students but new freshman in particular often revert to their high school forms and engage in "play" with any librarian when they think can get away with this behavior. This requires the librarian to fight for control of a class or lose the ability to teach effectively.

Both of these problems come directly from the fact that students rarely have any accountability to the librarians who are teaching library instruction sessions. As the session is usually one-shot, the students are tourists in class. The librarian will not give a test and there will be no grade assigned. And if the student seeks help later at the Reference Desk, even if they should have learned the answer in class already, assistance will still be provided.

Finally, there are conflicts between librarians over library instruction. This can be over the purpose of library instruction itself. Does the librarian teach the assignment or does the librarian teach about research skills for life? Also, many librarians have no desire to teach at all and actively resist all attempts to get them in the classroom.

There is a big divide in library instruction circles over what to teach in library instruction sessions. There are purists who argue that the main goal of the instruction should be to teach the tools the students will need to complete the assignment at hand. This is usually the hope of any faculty member who may ask a librarian to conduct an instruction session. However, many librarians reject this in favor of teaching students how to be information literate so that they will have the skills to find and analyze information on their own in the future. After all, the tools will change in the future but the underlying principles of information seeking will not.

Clearly, many instruction librarians incorporate both views in their classrooms. The students have to be able to complete the assignment they were sent to the library to learn about. However, it is also useful to teach the students broader skills for information seeking at the same time. Not all librarians can make this compromise though and "doctrinal" disputes have arisen in a library as librarians have fought over what the library instruction curriculum should actually teach. This conflict is also reflected in the library literature on library instruction and information literacy.

Many librarians have no desire to teach at all. Many librarians have no background or training in education. They entered the profession without realizing that some libraries require librarians to teach. When they are thrown into an environment with an active library instruction program, conflict is inevitable.

If this conflict is not resolved, greater problems will ensue. Library instruction is a time intensive and stressful activity. It is a lot of work to engage with faculty, prepare for class, and to actually teach. If some librarians routinely are required

to do the bulk of this while others are excused, resentment and staff turnover are likely. If librarians who do not want to be in the classroom are forced to do so, they may make poor instructors who harm the entire program. Resolving this conflict will tax the efforts of most library managers.

### **Resolving Conflict in Library Instruction**

As shown in this paper, there are a lot of areas in running a library instruction program that can lead to conflict. As such, library managers charged with supervision of a library instructional program should be prepared to use conflict resolution to try and resolve these issues in a way that leaves as many people as possible feeling as though their needs were addressed. This might not be easy. However, the rewards of a better functioning library instruction program make the goal worthwhile.

The first step should be for every library manager working with the management of an instruction program to look into training for conflict resolution. As conflict resolution skills are not normally taught in library schools, it is very likely that the library manager himself will have to look into personal training on the topic. As both Girard (1995) and Inger (1991) noted that educators are in need of training in conflict resolution, it is reasonable to theorize that most librarians on the instruction front line are also in need of training in this area. The library manager is going to need to make sure that his staff gets some training in conflict resolution as they probably lack previous training.

Getting librarians up to speed on conflict resolution would be a big help on most of the issues that create conflict in instruction programs. The majority of these issues are best resolved when two people can work out their differences on their own. It is not in the best interest of the library to have to resolve conflict through mediation or arbitration. Ideally, the individual librarians will develop and use the skills that allow them to empathize with others and find creative compromises that allow all parties to get a just resolution when there is conflict.

This is particularly true of the conflict that often erupts between librarians and faculty. This is perhaps the most important relationship in the entire library instructional arena. If the librarian gains the basic skills of conflict resolution, he is more apt to be able to work with a faculty member to smooth out differences over what should be taught in the classroom. The librarian can use his expertise on the topic of library instruction and also find out why the faculty member has different ideas and find ways to incorporate them into the instruction session. These same skills can be transferred over to the controversies of a library assignment. Can not both the intent of the faculty member and the knowledge of the librarian be accurately reflected in the assignment?

The problems stemming from conflicts of classroom usage may be a bit more fraught with peril. Many faculty members will understand the rules for library classroom usage. However, no amount of reasoning will satisfy others who do not understand why a perfectly good classroom is being withheld from them. This is an area which will provide a librarian with the opportunity to find creative solutions and compromises with

the requesting faculty member.

For example, the room may not be available for reservation without a librarian present to conduct instruction but perhaps the faculty member would be willing to change the request to a more formal library instruction request. Also, the librarian may find a way to allow the faculty member to use the room on a one-time basis. Despite the best attempts, it may be necessary to have a third party arbitrate this. Higher levels of library administration may be able to strike a compromise. It is not unheard of for this issue to be taken up by a Faculty Senate.

Many of the librarian-student conflicts can be solved with better communication between faculty and librarians. For example, lack of student attention in class can be dealt with by having the faculty member make the students accountable for the library instruction. Perhaps the students can be given a quiz or small assignment dealing with library topics that will be graded. Many students will pay attention if they know they are going to be assessed on the material. Also, the librarian may want to liven up the class to increase the attention of the students. Lorenzen (2001) advocated using active learning techniques in class and this may help the students learn the material if they are better able to connect it with their daily life.

Classroom behavioral problems by students can also be resolved by direct negotiation between librarians and faculty. If the students are accountable to the faculty member for their behavior, it is reasonable to expect that the faculty member will keep his or her class under control. As many problems occur when a faculty member chooses to skip the instruction session and leave the librarian on his own, requiring faculty to be present during library instruction may help to eliminate this problem.

Of all the problems which may stem from a library instruction program, conflict between librarians may be the hardest to deal with from a management perspective. Disagreements with faculty and students may be unpleasant but they are of limited duration. Conflicts between librarians on the other hand upset the everyday life of the library as the respective parties have to work with each other every day.

Conflict over the curriculum should probably be addressed by having librarians sit down and discuss exactly what they believe should be taught. Are there shared points of common ground? Is it possible to teach both library instruction skills and information literacy skills in the same class? This is an important and meaningful way to allow librarians to work the conflict out on their own. If there is still disagreement, the librarians can decide if it is ok for them to teach differently. It may be necessary for the library administration to arbitrate and make the final decision on the curriculum if the librarians can not resolve the issue on their own.

Disagreements over who should teach may be the hardest conflict to address over all. This directly impacts the work load of librarians and helps to decide who are actually engaging students in instruction. Probably the easiest solution would be to

*Conflict resolution...continued on p.11*

sparkling eyes. “Good morning,” you sing never breaking stride.

4. Welcome everyone with a huge grin and boundless enthusiasm. Tell them they all look fabulous and you’ve got a fantastic show class for them today. You are so excited that they are here because you have some very important issues to discuss with them this morning.
5. Now, get serious. Bring them down. Lower your tone. Look directly at the camera students and tell them why they are here. Explain the issues you will address, the important work we must all do. How we all have responsibility and an obligation to correct the injustices and horrors of the past.... But there is hope.

6. Take a 3 minute break every 12 minutes. Why not? They have an attention span of gold fish, so cut them some slack and let them chill. This gives you time to talk to the guest teacher, rehearse the next segment, freshen up in the powder room.
7. When you wrap-up, remind everyone how much better *you* feel about their being there today. The struggle still exists, but hopefully today’s experience has brought a deeper awareness of the issues we all battle.
8. End with enthusiasm and humility and huge superstar smile!

Oh... and make sure everyone gets a f-a-b-u-l-o-u-s parting gift!

### *Conflict resolution...continued from p.9*

head off conflict by only hiring librarians who both want to teach and have the skills to do so. Careful screening of applicants may prevent this conflict from arising in the first place.

However, some librarians burn out and lose the desire to teach. Others have been with a library for a long time and have never taught much to the resentment of others. This conflict may have to be addressed. The leader should try several approaches. The first should be to talk with the recalcitrant librarians and see if there are things that can be done to facilitate their entrance to the classroom. Is more training need in teaching skills? Can other portions of the job be rearranged to give the librarian time to teach?

If this does not work, the library leader then needs to make decisions. Is forcing a librarian to teach worth it? Will it cause more problems for other librarians and students than it is worth? If the issue is forced, it is highly likely that a grievance or legal action may be initiated as a librarian argues about changes to the job description. This could result in costly and lengthy conflict resolution via binding arbitration.

Finally, the library manager needs to look at all conflict in library instruction and make choices as to when the best approach to conflict resolution is to let a non-library party win. Even if the library is right, other considerations may dictate that it is best to allow a party in a conflict to have what they want. For example, perhaps giving a faculty member a library classroom is worth the cost.

There is a lot to consider for a library leader when managing a library instruction program. There are multiple points where conflict can arise. Getting training for oneself and for other instructional staff is important. The manager should also encourage active listening, cooperation, acceptance of differences, and creative problem solving as all of these skills can help resolve conflict in a manner that allows for all to get what they need.

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