

Cooperative Conflict: Neither Concurrence Nor Debate

EDUCATION WEEK

September 13, 2017

Cooperative Conflict

Neither Concurrence Nor Debate

By Alfie Kohn

It's been said that there are two kinds of people in the world: those who think in binary terms and those who don't. When students are given something to read and then asked whether they "agree or disagree" with the author, they're being trained as dichotomizers – encouraged to think in black and white rather than to construct a nuanced position. Such assignments also assume that a student's opinion is a fixed point of reference against which others' positions can be evaluated. This excludes the possibility that one's views might change in light of new arguments or evidence.

When students are presented with controversial topics, another simplistic dichotomy often appears: Either debate . . . or try to reach consensus. Both of these options, I believe, are troubling – albeit for very different reasons.

To be sure, there is something to be said for the idea of consensus when a decision must be made. It's better for students to hash things out together than just to vote. While even the latter is preferable to having the teacher make a

unilateral decision, voting doesn't require listening, reflecting, or compromising; the majority just rolls over the minority.

But sometimes we push people to come to an agreement prematurely so as to avoid conflict. That's when it's worth remembering that conflict, per se, is not harmful. In fact, the *absence* of conflict may suggest a problem – for example, a lack of interest or gumption. Most important, bypassing disagreement deprives students of a real education. The word “challenge,” after all, has two meanings: to call something into question and to require people to use their full range of abilities. Genuine learning does not smooth over or soothe.

Discovering that a classmate thought a story's character had a motive unlike the one you had inferred – or came up with a different explanation for why these plants grew faster than those – nudges you to think through the problem in a new way, to construct meaning around that fresh perspective. Such clash is the key to social and moral growth, too. As Robert Frost put it, “The best way out is always through.”

On the other hand, clashing doesn't always work out so well. So what curdles conflict and makes disagreement destructive? The answer, in a word, is competition. When a discussion turns into – or is framed from the beginning as – a *debate*, the point becomes winning rather than discovering what's true or reaching a satisfying solution. Just listen in at a faculty meeting or a dinner party and you can hear the difference between someone participating in a genuine exchange of ideas and someone trying to score points.

Whenever competition appears, learning is apt to suffer. Decades of research have shown that any arrangement in which people are set against one another tends to undermine psychological health, concern for others, and quality of thinking. Also, interest in the task itself – painting, writing, coding, solving math problems, whatever – is apt to

decline if someone else must fail in order that I can succeed. The extrinsic goal of triumph (winning an argument) diminishes the intrinsic appeal of the activity (curiosity about the topic under discussion).

*

The good news is that we aren't forced to choose between creating a classroom in which students must arrive at an artificial consensus and one in which conflict is present but manifests itself as an adversarial exercise. The alternative is to invite disagreement but nest it in caring and a framework of shared goals.

This has been called cooperative conflict, constructive controversy, or, in a poetic turn of phrase by the brothers and social scientists Roger and David Johnson, "friendly excursions into disequilibrium." Its premise is that conflict will – and should – occur when people play with ideas or attempt to make decisions together; the relevant question is whether it will take place in the context of competition or cooperation. In the latter, one not only learns about the issues under discussion but also gets to experience the possibility of civil discord.

The first step is to help students feel part of a caring community – and develop a range of social skills. Conflict is then introduced gradually so the bonds between them can accommodate mildly opposing views before they're asked to thrash out more incendiary issues. For his part, the literacy expert Frank Smith recommended bringing a second adult into the classroom, someone whose views diverge from the teacher's – and who can challenge those views without engaging in a debate.

A number of studies have been conducted on the effects of cooperative conflict by the Johnsons, along with their graduate students and colleagues over the years. It turns out

that most students prefer this approach to either “concurrency-seeking” or debate – and for good reason: It promotes more effective learning, more interest in the subject, and more positive attitudes toward fellow students. In one such study, dating back all the way to 1981, sixth graders considered the environmental and economic impacts of logging and mining. Those who did so under conditions of cooperative conflict reported more positive attitudes toward the activity and toward one another. They also learned the material better – a result that held for students of all ability levels.

Friendly excursions into disequilibrium is that rare pedagogical strategy that yields powerful benefits without requiring extensive or expensive training. But it merits our attention also because of the hidden costs of what it replaces: the pretense of avoiding conflict, on the one hand, and the unnecessary ugliness of debate, on the other. That we can disagree without seeing others as opponents to be bested is a revelation – within classrooms and beyond them.

To be notified whenever a new article or blog is posted on this site, please enter your e-mail address at www.alfiekohn.org/sign-up.