Cultivating Social Cohesion through Conflict Transformation in Educational Environments

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ABSTRACT

Teaching in our current times brings many new challenges that professors and students are navigating together. In the conflict resolution field, there are a variety of frameworks that may support fostering inclusivity in the classroom, though these elements still need to be discovered in mainstream academia and beyond. Several strategies will be shared that were implemented in classes, along with feedback from students, indicating a successful and inclusive atmosphere, even though a majority of the topics discussed were challenging. Developing effective strategies can transform a classroom. Active learning strategies can also create inclusive classrooms. In addition to the traditional challenges that students and teachers face, there are political challenges to what, how, and why specific topics are taught. Looking broadly and critically at these challenges may result in negotiating a collaborative process to actively create social cohesion within the classroom and beyond.
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As our world continues to advance, so too does the need for new possibilities in fostering social cohesion in the classroom. The instructor’s role is vital in supporting an environment that will inform students of the ongoing and future challenges. Reimagining the role of professors is crucial. The ripple effect that education has cannot be understated. The possibilities that may manifest in the classroom—whether offline or online, or even a combination of the two—are endless. How the class is structured and the environment that is cultivated is crucial to fostering the developmental capacities of students.

Most professors generally undergo some form of diversity, equity, and inclusion training, though they seldom have an extensive practitioner/academic background in conflict resolution. These skills are vital in classroom dynamics to fostering social cohesion through conflict transformation. For many students, classes can create severe anxiety—with a significant emphasis on the teacher’s disposition and classroom management. Professors can often be seen in a position of power, which can be intimidating. Social cohesion is prevalent in political discourse, documents, and debates. However, the definition is complex, though it relates to a certain degree to tying individuals together. Social cohesion can involve behaviors and feelings toward other racial groups. Various metrics are used to indicate social cohesion. Social-psychological facets are also a social cohesion factor, including belonging and interracial trust. Teachers who are building connections with students use tools that are not traditional teaching tools but belong to an arsenal of social cohesion tools.

Part of teaching is lecturing, which provides the teacher’s expertise through a formatted delivery for students. However, teachers likely have expectations that they carry into the classroom because of their history and background; their pedagogy informs how they teach. If the context of a teacher’s background is not understood, contributing factors lead to a classroom domain that is socially disconnected. Teachers have to understand themselves before they can understand their students. Building a symbiotic relationship instead of the one-way lecture can be fostered by using techniques that require co-creating and sharing dialogue. Teachers must include students in dialogue to have successful, inclusive classrooms. Students should feel heard and respected. Teachers should go beyond using fixed information such as ethnic demographics, SAT information, and GPA. Instructors should look for alternatives to help students express their circumstances and experiences. This type of engagement is referred to as actively participating in their learning experience. The active participation of students is a powerful tool because it encourages students to take charge of their learning.

Students and teachers can also become partners in cultivating a positive, inclusive relationship. Reimagining the student-teacher relationship to that of co-creating is situated between engaging students and partnering with them. This type of engagement encourages essential partnerships that co-create knowledge in a reciprocal manner and safe place. With reciprocity, all involved can meaningfully participate and share, although they share differently. Students get the support they need while contributing to a mutually beneficial dialogue.

However, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. proclaimed that the greatest power of all is love. Therefore, in the classroom, cultivating a beloved community is crucial to cultivating social cohesion. Therefore, professors should see themselves as inclusive facilitators—not simply as lecturers. Recognizing each student beyond the group dynamics is essential to enhancing the educational environment.

Encouraging classroom dynamics to be dialogue-oriented is also crucial. A dialogue seeks to have everyone voice their thoughts, where the dialogue flows naturally and students are respected. Some of these dynamics include accepting the experiences of the students, allowing them to speak from their own understanding and backgrounds, collaborating together toward common goals, and perhaps most importantly, an inclination to learn from students who may believe differently.⁵

Having a multifaceted understanding of autoethnography from a cultural context is also beneficial in the classroom.⁶ Autoethnography is an expansive methodology which has been defined by a variety of researchers.⁷ The basic tenets of autoethnography include the self (auto), culture (ethno), and writing (graphy), which can cultivate a research paradigm that is potentially transformative.⁸ Autoethnography often involves the individual's life experiences as a process to gain additional understanding of the self in connection to people who are different from us, along with the broader society.⁹ The autoethnographic process can perhaps also cultivate an ability to embrace people who are different than us, even those who may be seen as adversaries.¹⁰

Autoethnography is being utilized in various environments beyond research-based approaches and is often now included in practitioner spaces and classrooms. In integrating the transformative autoethnography model, there are several elements to take note of, such as the awareness of experiences that may generate internal conflicts, analyzing and evaluating these experiences and previous assumptions about them, contending with conceivable new perspectives that may emerge and applying them through action, and then undergoing evaluations of the transformations that may have emerged and further thought processes that may lead to additional actions.¹¹ This process could potentially start with the creation of a culturegram (either as part of the process or a standalone activity), which is a cultural diagram of the self in connection with society and beyond.¹²

A culturegram, which is a component of autoethnography, often includes elements such as religions, interests, ethnicities, and more. These categories could vary based on how the individual decides to create the culturegram, as seen in the image below (fig. 1).

However, while there are traditional templates in creating a culturegram,¹³ it is important to recognize that placing individuals in boxes may limit the transformative process of the autoethnography. Rather, a creative process of personally creating a culturegram may support additional transformation through the self-reflexive process.¹⁴
Fostering inclusivity can also occur through utilizing culturegrams as part of autoethnography in the classroom. Culturegrams can provide an opportunity to analyze and reflect on a variety of personal internal and external elements, which results in seeing a person's characteristics visually. Through the process of creating a culturegram, the ability to see the self in the present from multiple perspectives can emerge for possible transformation.15 Questions to help guide students include:

1. What exactly does a culturegram represent to me?
2. How do I identify and connect myself with culture and heritage?
3. Who exactly am I and how do I connect with society?
4. Where may I feel disconnected and not at peace?

5. What parts of my heritage are visible within me, such as my culture, my community, my school, and in physical buildings, such as memorials, monuments, museums, and places of worship?

6. Are these areas inadequate or insufficiently noticeable around me?

7. Do I feel more connected within a digital space rather than a physical space?

8. If so, why? Or are there multiple thoughts arising?

9. Do I feel visible and seen, is my voice being heard?

10. How do I share about myself visually?

The culturegrams can be shared with one another in class—whether online, offline, or through asynchronous capabilities to support learning about one another and cultivating social cohesion in the classroom. The culturegram can also help viewers recognize a person’s values through a visual representation.

Having students understand their own values and recognizing how that contributes to the classroom and their future is also beneficial. Through an adapted and modified worksheet first developed by Maureen Metcalf and Dani A. Robbins, students have the ability to contemplate what values are most important to them, and how they may apply them in their lives. Some of the discussion questions circle around what their top values mean to the students and taking the time for students to reflect on and discuss these elements.

Later in the course or school year, students can then be asked to do a similar activity, this time together as a group. The goal of the activity is to see if students can collectively find and agree on shared values. When individuals can recognize that they may have different values but also can find elements that they all connect and agree on, a deep sense of community can be built. Feedback from open discussions and anonymous surveys shows that values activities have been very warmly received by students and participants in a variety of courses and workshops. This activity provides opportunities for deeper dialogues and a reminder that peace is possible.

Students can also be extremely self-critical, and having the ability to make students feel comfortable sharing challenges can open up possibilities for further growth. Paul Redekop encourages fostering inner peace by contemplating which features we most love about ourselves. Having an activity where students can take some time to reflect and respond to this question may help cultivate a renewed sense of self. Using words such as “I can’t” or “I won’t” can also be limiting.

Encouraging compassionate communication both within the classroom and in the personal lives of students is paramount to recognizing new possibilities for transformation. Through their observations, feelings, needs, and requests, students can become more aware of their


18. The University of Rhode Island, through their Kingian Nonviolence Training Guide, offers a worksheet on finding shared values, which is available online via a lesson plan from Memphis City Schools (2014).

intrapersonal dynamics, which can foster deeper interpersonal and classroom connections. Being cautious when utilizing some of the following communications, which can prevent students from empathy, is also helpful: shutting down, one-upping, sympathizing, interrogating, explaining, and correcting. Accepting each person's experiences as valid and viewing them through their own lens is key to recognizing the complexity of our humanity.

Reminding students to be in the now—the present—is also crucial. William Ury suggests that being in the present can support students’ ability to focus on what they can do to make the day better, which in turn can support an encouraging future. Understanding and addressing our human needs is also vital for students' well-being. After all, conflicts are often the result of underlying needs not being addressed. When a conflict emerges, the instructor (with support from the students) should ask, “What are you needing right now in this moment?” This question can help open up new pathways for potential growth, especially given the sensitivities that some minority communities are currently experiencing.

Inclusive teachers should design courses to reduce inequality and foster inclusivity. They should also find ways to remove social structures that inhibit and marginalize students. Emotional intelligence theories refer to adolescent development benefiting from caring exchanges with adults who are not their parents, such as teachers. There is a lack of data regarding how much a student wants caring exchanges with teachers as they enter college. Conversely, empirical research shows that the student-teacher relationship weakens after students enter junior high school and gets worse afterward.

However, because the need for caring, supportive connections is less after middle school, college students will likely not seek caring, supportive, inclusive exchanges with teachers even though they may benefit significantly from such dialogue. Understanding that relationships have a systemic nature will help teachers identify processes and variables inextricably tied to the teacher-student relationship. Because the relationship functions systemically, they impact the outcome of the relationships. How the student and the teacher perceive and internalize the relationship is paramount for a good relationship that fosters inclusivity. Teachers should also use trauma-informed practices (TIP) in order to promote a safe learning environment.

Right now, there is no dominant or specific agreed-upon framework for trauma-informed practices. Trauma-informed practices are actions that create safe and caring surroundings as they relate to trauma. Trauma-informed practices tout designing a school culture that is safe and secure, building relationships, and promoting the self-efficacy of students. Educators can implement general trauma-informed practices throughout educational arenas. The practices have been evaluated by educators who work as specialized instructional support personnel, teachers, and professionals in the field of education.

The urgency in addressing trauma is critical, because in trauma, students can experience overwhelming conflicts that can become unsolvable. As youth continue to develop, the unaddressed or unhealed trauma may be further concerning. Trauma has been connected to substance abuse, depression, bipolar disorder, and post-traumatic stress disorder. Trauma is often “avoided, ignored, belittled, denied, misunderstood, and untreated,” which can impact students monumentally. Additionally, the stress of these traumatic incidents can impact the

When people experience traumatic events, internal complexities may occur that can potentially distort their human needs. Instructors need to have trauma-informed modalities to recognize the elements of trauma to support the well-being of students, be aware of their individual needs, and help them succeed. Some additional trauma-informed strategies are also available through the program Strategies for Trauma Awareness and Resilience (STAR), which has been implemented worldwide in a variety of environments. There are also other publications and resources on trauma healing and restorative justice in schools that provide additional applications.

Having more frameworks for trauma-informed teaching is also essential. Paper Airplanes offers some trauma-informed modalities during the training and onboarding process. The training is in preparation to support students who have been impacted by violence, such as war. Reflective readings are provided to help understand the impact of trauma and possible learning challenges that can emerge. Being able to recognize the complexities of trauma and how to be sensitive in discussing certain topics are also highlighted. Paper Airplanes is a nonprofit organization that focuses on a variety of educational programs for people impacted by conflict. For example, their online English program provides one-on-one sessions and/or conversation sessions. Paper Airplanes seeks additional volunteers to support this initiative, as their English program is in high demand. The skills gained through volunteering will certainly be beneficial for any classroom.

Another best practice includes educators collaborating to help students’ physical and mental health across all educational landscapes. Student support across domains helps to foster a favorable school culture. The goal is to make students feel safe and assured. Teachers have to support students and practice trauma-informed practices for successful outcomes.

As teachers, having facilitative skills is also vital for fostering inclusion. Facilitative skills include being able to make sure each voice is heard and having a variety of activities and tools to connect further with students. Sometimes teachers lack facilitative capabilities, resulting in lecture-based formats that do not fully engage and include students. Lack of facilitation experience can hinder the potential transformation in the classroom. There are a variety of facilitative tools one can include when teaching that may additionally be helpful in supporting students. Facilitation skills may also include conflict coaching and mediation, which can support conflict transformation processes when students forget the founding principles of the classroom guidelines, which should be supported by the students as well at the beginning of the school year or during the first week of a course.

Additional conflict resolution modalities can be learned through the Ripple Effect Education, which recently started a new Training for Trainers online program to support teachers in utilizing conflict resolution skills in the classroom and beyond. Acquaint is also currently implementing AI trainings in conflict prevention, analysis, resolution, and transformation, which students age fifteen and older can access for free by signing up on their website. These AI trainings focus on active listening, how to communicate across differences, and how to communicate...


compassionately. Additional AI trainings are in development and are expected to include a variety of further dynamics to support students in cultivating more empathy. Acquaint’s main platform also provides online one-on-one dialogues worldwide, in which more than a thousand participants from over a hundred nations enter into virtual modules and embark on digital adventures to learn about one another.

There is also a need to recognize the importance of the arts in fostering inclusivity. Consider having students create puppets with personalities. In groups, students create stories that have conflicts, and apply conflict resolution frameworks within these stories. Once the stories are finalized, they can be performed in class or through a recorded video for asynchronous courses. Students can share what the process was in collaborating together, and what they learned through connecting together in exploring certain topics within a course that also includes conflict resolution modalities. Additional options include incorporating reflective practices of inclusivity from Shariff Abdullah and Leslie Hamilton, who have a workbook with engaging activities to support transformation.39 Shariff Abdullah offers another primer that presents a pledge to mend the world so that all can feel included.40 Some of these dynamics include recognizing that we are all one, and being peaceful. The possibilities are endless in fostering inclusivity, though as teachers, being open to the arts and new opportunities to learn is essential for reimagining peace and the future of our world.

34. See Paper Airplanes, "English Programs," 2024.


38. Acquaint, "Intercultural Volunteering," 2024


AUTHOR BIO

Dr. Sharon McIntyre teaches public administration at the University of Miami. Her research and practice include policy analysis, public sector ethics, human rights, social change, intercultural communication, interpersonal communication, and various levels of peacebuilding programs (civil society and government). One of her primary interests is the government implementation of policies regarding the quality of education and the nexus of economic mobility. She has also conducted qualitative research regarding the narratives students receive about 9/11 and the implication for peace and conflict resolution. McIntyre’s interests also focus on experiential and applied learning of viable, multitrack peacebuilding theories, models, and practices. Dr. McIntyre is a member of the American Society for Public Administration and the Association for Conflict Resolution.

Dr. Yehuda Silverman is a peacebuilding pracademic (practitioner/academic) who specializes in conflict prevention, analysis, and transformation. He is currently an instructor at Northwestern University’s Civic Education Project, facilitator at the International Center for Religion and Diplomacy, cultural exchange assistant for Acquaint, and Transatlantic Educators Dialogue Program fellow at the University of Illinois: European Union Center. He also mentors emerging peacebuilders through UNESCO Global Youth Community, Initiatives of Change, and United People Global. He previously had a postdoctoral academic appointment as the faculty diversity fellow at Ursuline College, where he developed and taught the course “Intrapersonal Peace and Conflict Prevention.” He has also facilitated courses online in coordination with UNESCO MGIEP, World Beyond War, Erasmus+, Soliya, World Learning, and Sharing Perspectives Foundation. He taught English online to people impacted by conflict (primarily Syrian refugees) and served as a global solutions sustainability challenge coach for IREX and a guardian ad litem (court-appointed special advocate) representing abused, abandoned, and neglected children. His PhD is in conflict analysis and resolution with a concentration in international peace (Nova Southeastern University), and he is also a certified facilitator in intercultural dialogue (UN-Habitat) and Kingian nonviolence conflict reconciliation (University of Rhode Island).

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