Panel 2A
Managing Conflict

Facilitator: Marie Paretti - Virginia Tech

Panelists:
1. Olga Pierrakos – Wake Forest University
2. Hadar Ziv – University of California, Irvine
3. Daria Kotys-Schwartz – University of Colorado, Boulder
4. Emma Drum (Student)

Description: This panel will allow attendees to learn different approaches to managing conflict between team members, between students and faculty, and other situations where conflict threatens a successful capstone experience.

Notes:

Marie: "Conflict" used as a negative word. But is it? Conflicts and disagreements can be a sign of diversity.

→ Conflict and different ways of working

Olga: Frame the culture ahead of time. Describe conflict. Let students know it is inevitable. It's an opportunity for feedback and growth. Remind them it's a learning experience.

→ has to be framed relative to client & advisor.

Daria: Design is a social process. Choose to not engage in difficult conversations, but then the design process stops/hindered.

→ all teams go through stages

→ Do you storm through quietly or loudly (as real selves are revealed)? Negotiate through conflict, have honest conversations to be better designers.

→ Remember, you'll have difficult conversations throughout your entire life.

Hadar: Undergrads haven't been in teams before, haven't been around diversity, haven't had major conflicts before, so ensure they are prepared for it. Talk about conflicts/team problems early! Don't wait until right before term/semester ends.

→ getting team challenges to surface can be a challenge.

Emma: From student perspective, going to a professor is intimidating. Going to office hours can be nerve-racking, the first time especially. Even harder to come forward with conflict.

Marie: students may not feel safe coming to prof because it may affect their grade.

How do you create the safest environment to allow students to come to you to ask for help with conflict resolution, time issues, etc.?

Daria: Build trust so students feel like they can come to you

→ Trust; Built in small moments overtime; taking advantage of opportunities as they present

themselves; such that they trust you with their well-being and their secretes

Olga: Association with grades makes it feel like they can't get that trust built, encourage openness in conversations

→ CATME backfired because of its link to grading; trust was not there from students

Response to Olga's question: I use CATME multiple times and the first few are used as formative tools - not associated with any grades while telling them how this feedback would have impacted the grades, if any. I do not use those numbers automatically and tell them how I interpret those numbers. They are honest when they know a human is processing those numbers (Shraddha Sangelkar).

Audience: build trust outside of classroom, go for a walk, get a coffee, real talk to get to know them

Marie: Trust in two senses:

→ trust within team, and

→ trust with the instructor are two different topics to consider.

What are things faculty do to make it easier/harder to build trust?

Emma: attitude, tone, inflection matter (answering questions with "You should already know that!" are demoralizing)

→ inflection, tone, and attitude matter

Olga: Seeing students who are conflict-avoidant. Perception of feedback is that it is an attack. Team had a convo with Olga *after* they had graduated: students had a hard time accepting the feedback, but it would have been easier to take the feedback if the professor was male.

→ gender dynamics

→ understanding that feedback is feedback

→ use sports as analogy for challenge, feedback, structure

Hadar: structure of sports can be important and analogous to capstone - they need structure

→ I don't always "do something (take action)" about the conflict and sometimes just listen. They feel more comfortable talking to you the next time when conflict comes up. (Shraddha)

Q: Is the perception related to student confidence?

Olga: [missed response] (Indicated that yes it connects to the team's confidence)

Audience: Normalize feedback, positive and negative.

Daria: previous experiences have conditioned them to not bring up issues with teams to their profs. Also, students didn't want to disappoint the prof that they couldn't handle it themselves.

→The bringing of conflict to the instructor is a crucial conversation for the students in and of itself.

Marie: have them recognize profs feel "useless if we can't help them"! Ha!

Marie: Getting students to reveal the struggles they are haven't is major theme. Differences of opinion in direction of project could be conflict even. Personality influences conflicts as well. Now let's get past the idea that they have hard to coming to us for conflicts.

How do you as a prof help them get through conflict when they come to you?

Olga: Build it into program, reflect on what worked, what didn't; talk through this within the team (proactive approach). Encourage students to share and how to share within their team.

→ build in retrospectives

→ extract lessons learned

→ encourage students to address challenges

→ Use critical assignments to support process

→ Do you feel safe bringing this up to your team yourself? Let's talk about how to do this

Daria: Tea kettle moment: conflict builds and builds until it blows (student hijacked/stole the prototype from the team as an example).

→ Students were conflict ignorant - didn't realize there was something wrong

→ Put things into program (intentionality) - trainings at the start of class for baseline info, called onboarding

→ Active Bystander Training. How do you approach conflict from a bystander perspective? Workshop by university

→ How do you engage in difficult conversations?

→ Social Styles training - how you approach your work, you understand each other better

→ Team role, Team charter, peer reviews after all these trainings.

→ How do you train the students to even realize they are in a conflict in the first place?

→ Coaching students through the context of the conflict ("venn diagram of truth")

→ Meet with each team member to understand their own perspective, so you get entire picture. Be clear this won't affect their grade, you are only trying to help and coach, we need all the perspectives in order to fully understand what the actual conflict is within those perspectives.

→ 80% of conflict is breakdown in communication, no malicious intent

Olga: that one-on-one coaching really helps

Hadar: Cotaught with Judy Olson, when she was asked how to teach capstone, she said "I'm doing social work". Endless hours working with people to solve human problems, not project problems.

Daria: Space where mental health comes into play. "I didn't want to have an excuse". "It's not an excuse, it's a reason"

Emma: I really like that, I'm going to start using "it's not an excuse, its a reason.". For three person groups, it's not usually as big an issue. In 4-person groups, we tend to have one person that doesn't do anything.

→As a student, I didn't have the tools to handle that yet. One semester, the team lead was assigned, but in second semester the least performing student became the team lead (did NOT work well) - this was a "*solution*" to the problem that didn't *solve* the problem.

Marie: A common conflict of perception or reality that someone is not pulling their weight.

How do you coach someone through that particular situation?

Hadar: Traditionally treated it in a punitive approach, which isn't good. Used to approach with the mentality of "Problem that needs to be solved", now approach it as "opportunity to help improve".

→ Could treat as a challenge/ opportunity to embrace diversity

Daria: Large capstone program, scope of project can aide in conflicts in teams. Also, every person needs a team role.

→ Project scope must be right

→ Ensure it's understood that the project's stretch goals need everyone

→ Team member gets a role - everyone of them

→ Meeting minutes after every meeting. Each person needs clear Action items in the meeting minute. Ex. Action Item of "look for motors" has no clear expectation within it so no wonder it took 4 weeks to complete.

→ using meetings minutes at tools to gain insight

→ working together with the faculty advisor to help coach team (team member) based upon minutes

→ After all that, we bring them in if issues are still there. Bring them in, lay out what their role was, then ask what their perspective is on their work. Sometimes they don't realize there is a problem, sometimes they really just don't care, but then you have a clear picture of the issue.

Olga: INdividual performance reviews, emphasize that this happens in industry so it's good practice to learn to take in feedback on your work.

Marie: Willingness to engage in this is important. It's not a matter of if there will be conflict, it's WHEN there will be conflict. We have to be willing to have difficult conversations ourselves as faculty.

Audience questions?

Audience: What is the nature of the problem is a great observation. Sometimes they come to you and you have to ask, "What do you want me to do about it?" Is this something you want me to act on or is it something you only want me to be aware of and to be posed to act without acting immediately. So thank you for this.

Audience: **On a project team that is successful, when you see one person that didn't perform, did you fail that student?**

Daria: Yes, we have failed that student. Documentation and evidence needs to show that that student has not performed as required. Be very careful with this when it does happen. Protect that students that are doing the work as well though. Definitely make sure you can back it by evidence. There are usually 6 meetings before the end of the semester to emphasize they have time to change or course correct.

Marie: Have conversations with the students about what they want out of the project.

→ What are you willing to do? Scope that initially: are you willing to get a C for that amount of work? If so, be transparent with the team as well - hey, this student has already stated this is what they will do and that they are willing to get a lower grade for it.

→ There's a certain freedom in being able to differently scope a project

Olga: Also consider giving students an incomplete if an emergency arises. Figure out what they can do after the term/semester is over to help the team.

Hadar: **Daria, Have you done other things like break up teams mid-project?**

Daria: Yes, we've trying splitting teams, taking off one member off the team, etc. We've tried it all. Asked Google how they deal with students not performing. Spend resources to figure out problem. Put the investment into the individual to keep them on the team as much as possible, otherwise issues spiral.

→ Developing individuals takes resources

Audience: The term is "social loafing"

Daria: Person once said there is no one industry that has everyone performing at the exact same level.

→if life happens here (capstone) then like inddusting it will not be perfect

Audience: There are instances where folks are behaving badly and it affects the team. **Can we dig into spaces where it's so bad we need to intervene and how to handle it?**

Daria: Can we meet their parents?

Olga: You have a responsibility to address it. Prepare for that conversation.

→ This is my perception of what happened. Do you understand why I see it this way? Do you

understand why it is not acceptable? Do you understand why your team is upset?

Daria: Early engagement!

Audience: Give students leeway when something is happening in their lives, get to know them, get to understand their circumstances. Portfolio of work can be good to prove amount of work.

Daria: Does anyone engage with the student to tell them it is not acceptable behavior? Some students might not understand it is "bad" behavior in this space.

→ Pull them out of class - "I enjoy having you in class, but if you want to remain in this community, there are some boundaries you have crossed."

→ At the end, we've involved other depts on campus sometimes, such as Equity/Diversity, OAC, etc.

→ Only at the end, do we put down/reference policy

→ OAC is great at coaching, check your university for resources.

Marie: separate behavior from belief. Focus on behavior when addressing conflict. Students expect the work world to be different - like students will be magically changed in the real world.

Emma: was in charge of ambassadors as lead ambassador, which was hard when they are peers and you are in charge of them. Sometimes they stopped caring, which was hard to understand from my perspective. Goes back to communicating, it might be that it wasn't about caring so much as it was about something else happening in their life.

Daria: the human brain fills in gaps with negative information. The negative is that they don't care, they checked out, etc. But communication can fill those gaps with positive or true information.

→ Also, the idea of power and status is important to acknowledge in the meeting. Relationship dynamics, power dynamics affect the conversation before it happens, so be aware of it.

→ Sometimes there are things to be lost when students engage in peer conversations, which may be another reason they don't start the convo.

Audience: Let students know there are bridges back to making things right.

Hadar: Student attitude towards profs are now more brash - tiktok buddy.

Daria: Starting to see a boldness, even before the pandemic. Might be conditioned before they come to us. Don't know what was allowed before, what their boundaries were.

→ "Stop, we are going to redo that. That kind of conversation is not acceptable. Let's try again.

It's okay to try again."

Emma: Social media plays a role. It influences students to be funny online to get more followers/likes/subscribers.

Audience: How do we maintain our sanity while dealing with other peoples' problems?

Audience: You co-teach! Send your co-instructor to deal with it, to be a sounding board. Have someone to talk through it.

Daria: I have an ocean of empathy to give. Sometimes by May my bucket is so dry, it's cracked in half. I need boundaries. So if I want my students to have boundaries, how do I do that in my own life. Walk the walk. Whether it's running, it's someone to bounce ideas off of, it's okay to admit I can't do this conversation today. Find ways to refill myself. You don't have to like all of them. You have a responsibility to teach all of them, but it's okay to not like all of them.

Questions for Panel

Q: How do you get conflicts to surface (early)?

Q: How do you build students' sense of safety in approaching faculty?

Q: Daria, Where can we find more about those workshops you mentioned for your students? (Shraddha)