7th World Conference on Educational Sciences, (WCES-2015), 05-07 February 2015, Novotel Athens Convention Center, Athens, Greece

Trust and Conflict Resolution: Relationship Building for Learning

Jeffrey Dickie[a]*

[a]Suan Sunandha Rajabhat University, Bangkok Thailand

Abstract

The objective of this research paper was to investigate conflict resolution in the classroom. The students' answers concerning teaching were coded according to phrasal meanings which revealed concepts. These codes and concepts then became input data into theoretical frameworks. The investigation indicated two conflicts: whether the information was valid and whether to make the study effort which was discussed as perceptions of teacher's competence in helping to learn. The relevant factors in helping to learn were predominately emotional and were important in the negotiation process to develop relationships with and around the information. In effect, confidence in the learning negotiation process with a focus towards relationship building with valid information seemed to be the motivators to make the study effort.

1. Introduction

This paper explores conflict resolution, trust and relationship building in the classroom as expressed by students. This is a follow-up study to, *What Do Students Want? A Coded Analysis* which suggested that relationship building was a vehicle for teaching and learning; and within that vehicle was the concept of trust (Dickie, 2014).

Trust has been described "as the willingness to be vulnerable under conditions of risk and interdependence" (Rousseau, Sitkin, Burt, & Camerer, 1998, p. 395). It has also been described as positive expectations based on the behavior of another, under conditions of vulnerability and dependence (Hosmer, 1995). Trust building occurs with positive conflict resolution which enhances the relationship; "When you are able to resolve conflicts in a relationship, it builds trust" (Segal & Smith, 2014, p. 1). Conflicts themselves often arise from, "a lack of

* Jeffrey Dickie. Tel.: 6621601195; fax: 6621601195.
  E-mail address: jeffrey.di@ssru.ac.th

understanding about different needs" but the resolutions usually require feelings of security and respect (Segal & Smith, 2014, p. 1). Construct variables of trust can include confidence, risk, meaning, control, power, interdependence, and expectation.

In addition to the variables, are the different conflicts and their perspectives; in the classroom, these can involve the teacher, student and subject matter. One can ask the question, "Can a teacher, student, information or skill be trusted to do what is expected?" The answer can determine the level of trust and indicate the successfulness of the relationship. Therefore, if relationship building is a vehicle for learning, then an investigation into the ways in which trust and conflict resolution are expressed will give insight into the teaching learning process.

2. Literature review

The secret to good relationships lies not only in responding to bids to communicate in positive ways but also in conflict resolution; people who build successful relationships are able to resolve conflicts effectively (Gottman & DeClaire, 2001). The importance of conflict resolution was echoed by Segal and Smith (2014) who state that conflict mismanagement can cause significant harm to any relationship. Relationships in the classroom may involve the teacher and the subject matter, the students and subject matter, the teacher and the student, and the student and student. Thus it is a complex environment of multiple relationships. And it is trust that may help reduce the complexity and increase confidence within these relationships. Moreover, it has been said that trust facilitates cooperative behavior (Gambetta, 1988). A mismanagement of trust can be a mismanagement of a classroom relationship and may create conflict and uncooperative behavior which can affect growth and learning.

Conflict can arise from differences in perceptions; and has been defined as opposite ideas or beliefs that cannot exist together (Longman, 2000). From this definition, conflict can involve a power struggle and therefore can be perceived as a threat which may result in a negative outcome. Solving conflicts successfully requires careful negotiations; these negotiations should be opportunities for growth and so can be considered part of the teaching learning process.

According to DeSteno (2014), three ways to learn can be to accept information, to analyze, and to do experiments; however, young people's ability to analyze or do experiments is limited, and consequently they must rely on knowledge from others. Students must have confidence with the information and the information giver. Without confidence, there can be a perceived risk in learning falsehoods and the effort to learn may not take place. Indeed, studies have shown that students tend not to accept information from a teacher seen to make mistakes (DeStano, 2014). Therefore the teacher and the information must be perceived as credible.

When differences or inconsistencies arise between information perceptions, there can be a choice on whether to make a best fit with existing knowledge structures or to create new knowledge structures; good learners accept information in order to experiment and analyze in order to create new knowledge structures (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1993). Acceptance is a key point, for without acceptance, the learning process will not begin. In a way, acceptance and then engagement with information is not unlike Samuel Coleridge's suspension of disbelief in fiction writing. This has been defined as "…the mechanism of assimilation required to appreciate an invented situation (Martin, n. d., p. 1)." This is not to suggest that new information is invented or fictional, although it may seem fictional as it is unknown to the learner, but only to suggest that there must be a willingness to accept the information or at least suspend disbelief in order to participate in the learning process in a similar way that one must suspend disbelief in an invented situation such as in a story or movie in order to participate with the plot. As in fiction, the suspension of disbelief can be fragile and inconsistencies or inaccuracies may cause credibility to be questioned (Martin, n. d.); such as when a teacher is observed to make a mistake. However, once a willing acceptance of the new information is given, the student can participate in the learning process. This assimilation of new information implies that students are continually working at the edge of their abilities in order to build new knowledge structures; this has been described as the investment and reinvestment in progressive problem solving activities until the new information has been habituated (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1993).

Ultimately, to move forward in the study and learning process, it would seem important to have trust and to perceive trust. Having trust is not behaviour but the psychological condition for behaviour (Rousseau et al. 1998); for the student, this psychological condition for behaviour is a willingness to study. The literature has described perceptions of trust from intension and motive, and/or from perceptions of behaviour (Lewicki, McAllister & Bies,

1998); for the student these are perceptions of the teacher in wanting and in being able to help learn. In addition, trust requires "confident positive expectations" (Lewicki, McAllister & Bies, 1998, p. 439). This suggests that students must have positive expectations in the learning outcome.

To sum up, students must have and perceive trust not only in the information but also in the teacher's ability to help learn. In other words, there is positive expectations for both the teacher and the information to do what is expected. In this way, whether to take the study step forward is a decision; the resolution of which in part for the student lies in having confidence in the teacher; and the resolution for the teacher is to persuade with perceptions of competency - successful conflict resolutions in helping to learn. Thus, investigating students' expressions and perceptions of competency can give insight into effective teaching strategies.

3. Methodology

This was a grounded coding research which also used research questions. The sample consisted of 32 first year students at an International College in Bangkok. The students were between 17 and 19 years of age and were products of the Thai education system. There were 22 female students and 10 male students. The students answered a question concerning the qualities of a good teacher in essay format with 150 words.

The study began by coding the essay answers according to the ideas and meanings. There was an effort to maintain an open mind to get all the ideas. Similar coded ideas were then organized and analyzed into concepts and themes. The increasing level of abstraction reduced and efficiently described the information which could then be viewed under theoretical frameworks.

The method was designed to answer three research questions: How is conflict resolution - trust, and relationship building expressed? What is the relative importance of the different conflict resolution? And finally, in what ways is conflict resolution, trust and relationship building connected to teaching and learning?

Since the expressions were important, all references to the students' work was not altered in any way. That is to say, there was no changes made to grammar and / or spelling. And finally, an important assumption must be declared: if the students could express an idea then they were aware of it at some conscious level; and as a result, they have attached both meaning and significance.

4. Findings

The findings from the 32 essay answers were summarized in Table 1. There were 11 concepts which were organized into 3 themes: family, knowledge, and emotional. Let us begin with the family theme which had a total of 19 references; it was created by combining *family* and *take care / love* concepts. These concepts were frequently mentioned in close proximity as in the example, "…takes care to all students. That makes love like my mother". An interesting example was "bad student don't get from parent"; this was unusual in that it did not seem to fit with the normal family take care concept and a possible explanation could concern motivation. Indeed, it will be seen in the discussion, that the family theme had both safety and motivating influences.

The information validity had 23 references. This concept contained the accuracy sub-concept, "smart" and "everything about knowledge" and the world knowledge sub-concept, "give suggestion for life" and "education and living". The two sub-concepts often occurred together and so were combined. This theme suggests that students want the teacher to be accurate and the information to be useful. It will also be discussed as the first conflict.

Table 1. Theme and concept references.

Family (safety) 19 total references (15%)		Knowledge (conflicts) 51 total references (39%)		Emotional (negotiation) 60 total references (46%)	
Care	13	Information Validity		Appearance	7
Family	6	Accuracy	10	Personality	21

World use	13	Empathy	5
		Humor	13
Help learn/study	28	Control bad	6
		Inspire	8

The help learn/study concept had 28 references. This concept implied some process that was said in many different ways: "make help understand", "problem solve", "give knowledge" and "help skill up". This theme represents the common expectations of a teachers' job and it will be discussed as the second conflict.

The emotional theme was the largest with a total of 60 references. It was made up of 6 concepts which often were mentioned in close proximity and thus seemed to be related: appearance, personality, empathy, humour, control bad, and inspire. In fact, it will be seen that they were related as the *how* in the negotiation process as indicated in the following example, "…nice and friendly – when have problem she give suggestion."

The physical appearance concept had 7 references and seemed to be connected with personality as in the example "cute and kind". In this way, personality seemed to be a reflection of appearance. However, there was an interesting exception, "Don't need to be handsome or beautiful but have knowledge and kind"; this example still reveals the attention to physical appearance, albeit diminished to the teaching skill and in so doing connects appearance, personality, and teaching.

The personality concept had 21 references with examples such as "nice so much", "kind", and "easy man". The references often pertained to being a "good man or woman". The 5 references of empathy concept involved having a focus towards the student as exemplified in the following example "think of the student". The humour and the control bad concept can be considered two different ways to understand stress in the environment. Together, they had a total of 19 references. An example which links appearance, humour, and personality together is "good teacher don't need to be handsome or beautiful but they must have funny or friendly with us." The last emotional concept was inspiration, "make hope", with 8 references. This concept suggested encouragement and empowerment, "she make me have inspiration inside me. What I want to be and what I can be."

In brief, the coded findings were divided into 3 main themes: Family, Knowledge, and Emotional. These themes will be found to be important for the safety, the conflicts and *how* one negotiates respectively. In addition, each will be found to be important for motivation albeit in different ways.

5. Discussion

Negotiation has been defined as "a process of resolving conflict and trying to agree on something" (Wongleedee, 2012, p. 164). In the classroom, the *something* can be considered the subject matter and the *trying to agree* can be considered the learning negotiation process involving conflict resolution. These negotiations can also be considered relationship building activities involving influence and persuasion. Influence and persuasion are much easier when there is trust. Evaluations of trust include benevolence, being concerned enough to help, and ability or competency, as well as integrity, having acceptable principles (Lewicki & Tomlinson, 2003).

This discussion will first investigate the students' perceptions of integrity, discussed as belief structures, then their motivations, and finally their perceptions of competence. The investigation into competency will be separated into perceptions of information validity and into perceptions of the teacher's ability to help learn. In this way, the discussion will follow the learning process.

As mentioned in the literature review, an important step in the learning process is to suspend disbelief in the subject matter and distrust in the teacher; or stated in more positive words, to have a willing trust; this usually requires a motivating interest and common ground of familiar beliefs. Understanding the students' beliefs can be achieved using Lawrence Kohlberg's Model of Moral Development. From this model, these students had an understanding of right and wrong, good and bad that would appear to fit into stage 3. This stage is characterized by good behaviour and concern for others with feelings such as love, empathy, understanding, fairness and trust (Crain, 1985); therefore, these students will not only expect but will also judge any learning negotiation accordingly. And so, the good things of stage 3 are not only the motivating preconditions required to suspend the disbelief and distrust but also the conditions for learning negotiation - the relationship trust building activities.

Effective conflict resolution also requires understanding the needs and motivations of the other parties involved (Segal & Smith, 2014). For objectives of this study, the teacher should understand the motivations and interests of the students; it may be that these interests are the motivation for the suspension of distrust. Insight into the needs and motivations of the students were revealed in the Family Theme and can be explained using Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs Theoretical Model. Maslow's model consists of 5 levels; from lowest to highest, these are as follows: Biological, Safety, Love and Belonging, Esteem, and Self Actualization (Chapman, 2012). According to the analysis, there were a very significant number of codes that fit into the level 2 needs of Safety and level 3 needs of Love and Belonging; the level 3 needs imply motivation to create relationships, particularly family like relationships which result in that important sense of belonging.

It is interesting to note that these students have split level needs. Thus, a safe environment along with a motivating direction up towards creating a sense of belonging by building relationship bonds with both people and information during assimilation activities should result in learning. In this way, relationship building can be the motivation for the act of learning. But this assumes that there is a decision to focus on the information - that the information is valuable which leads us to demonstrations of competence.

The perception of competence and the decision on whether to focus on the information can be found in the knowledge theme's information validity, which will be discussed as the first conflict. As mentioned in the literature review, there can be three ways to learn: to accept information, to analyze, and to experiment (DeSteno, 2014). Learning begins by accepting information, and so the students must first decide or resolve the conflict on whether the information is valid, useful, or in some way beneficial. The coding process revealed learning by accepting information in the knowledge theme with the sub-concepts of accuracy and world knowledge. The example, "have good answer" illustrates the importance of the teacher's accuracy; in fact, some studies have shown that students have difficulty accepting information from a teacher who makes mistakes (DeSteno, 2014). In this way, the motivation to learn the information can be lost if the information is perceived as incorrect. Closely associated with the teacher's accuracy was useful information represented by the world knowledge sub-concept: information having practical applications in the real world exemplified by "knowledge help living outside classroom". These two sub-concepts of accuracy and world knowledge represented 23 of the 49 references in the knowledge theme indicating a relative importance of 45 percent. This means that mismanagement of information could affect 45 percent of the students and /or 45 percent of their ability to learn and remember. It is important to note that the teacher and curriculum developers are all responsible for information validity which motivates the students to accept the information and move on to the assimilation process which leads us to the next important group of perceptions and demonstrations of competence – Helping to learn.

Helping to learn can be a negotiation process in which the students can perceive ability and benevolence. Moreover, these negotiations are the motivating relationship building activities with the focus on the subject matter and involving all the participants as illustrated in figure 1. Having and perceiving trust is central to these negotiations. Trust, has been described as "the willingness of a party to be vulnerable to the actions of another party based on the expectation that the other party will perform a particular action important to the trustor" (Mayer, Davis, & Schoorrman, 1995, p. 712). In the classroom context, this suggests that the student is willing to be vulnerable to the teacher's ability and that the student is willing because of the valuable knowledge or skill to be gained. Therefore, the next conflict, beyond that of valuable knowledge, is whether to stay within the safety of known skills and knowledge or risk stepping into the unknown and begin assimilating new information with the positive expectations that the teacher can help. This requires the teacher to persuade by demonstrating competence. The relative conflict importance was revealed in the knowledge theme under the help learn/study concept at 55 percent.
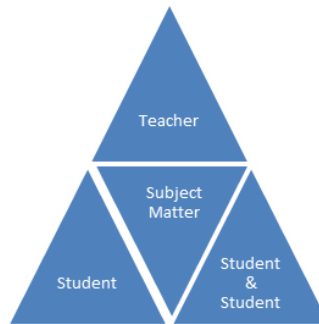
Fig. 1. Relationships with and around the subject matter.

According to the coding, positive expectations in helping to learn were found in the Emotional Theme in the concepts of Appearance, Personality, Control Bad, Humour, and Inspiration. These were the expectations of how teachers should perform; the successful management of which demonstrates competency and creates trust; the trust that is required not only to suspend disbelief and negativity but to enable cooperative behaviour in which to negotiate.

And so in order to assimilate the subject matter, the student must trust the teacher to help learn long enough in order to develop bonds with the information. One way to built trust is to provide support (Gottman & DeClaire, 2001); student bids are met with positive responses. In effect, this help learn can be considered an information negation process in which both the teacher and student negotiate or "discuss until understand". However, this negotiation process should have the positive bids and responses of Kohlberg's stage 3. Some of these positive responses were demonstrated in the personality and appearance concepts, "cute and kind," and also by an empathetic focus towards the students. Poorly managing bids would adversely affect the environment and hinder any learning negotiation for conflict resolution and so it would be important to control bad emotions. Therefore, the manner in which the teacher handles the negotiation process will in fact affect the relationship bonds with both the subject matter and the students. An interesting negotiation strategy representing almost 22 percent of the emotional references was humour.

Good students are working on the edge of knowledge and ability assimilating information (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1993); they are continually asked to step forward into the unknown. This may produce risk and fear resulting in stress. Stress can overwhelm and immobilize. How does the teacher reduce the stress? – Humour. According to Segal and Smith (2014), humour plays an important role in conflict resolution. With humour as a stress reducer, students are more willing to take the risk into the unknown. Students demonstrated an awareness of humour with examples such as "make laugh" and "make smile". From those examples, one can assume that the students were aware at some mental level of the importance to reduce stress. Therefore, the use of humour can affect teacher's negotiation competency.

Competency was also demonstrated with inspire. Because of the risk associated with stepping into the unknown, students may have a fear of failure. To step forward, students must believe that they can be successful. Interestingly, this concept had only 8 references but seemed to contain the trust constructs of risk, confidence, meaning, control and power. These constructs would suggest importance but to these students, inspire was rarely mentioned. The answer may be found in the Maslow's Hierarchy. These students were best described as level 2 going into level 3 in the context of the classroom and their learning. Safety and relationships were dominating their thoughts. Perhaps inspire would be found with more mature students operating at the higher levels.

In summary, there are two conflicts resulting in two competency persuasion processes: persuading that the information is valid and persuading to step into the learn/study process. In other words, the information must be good and the teacher must be perceived as competent otherwise the student will not risk the time and effort into learning. Valid information along with positive negotiations and resolutions enhance trust and build relationships with relationships being a key motivator. However, there should be perceptions of security, acceptable beliefs, benevolence, and an interest to encourage the suspension of distrust in order to create the negotiation opportunities.

5. Conclusion

The teaching learning process, in this study, was likened to negotiations involving conflict resolution; the successful resolutions of which were necessary to build trust and in so doing create relationships that had a focus with and around the important subject matter or information. That is to say, the information and teacher did what was expected and fulfilled the positive expectations. Furthermore, it was the information and teacher which defined the two conflicts: Whether the information was valid and whether the teacher had ability to help learn. Imposed over this conflict resolution scenario was a required suspension of distrust; an adaptation but with an alteration of Samuel Coleridge's suspension of disbelief which has been described as an assimilation mechanism (Martin, n. d.).

The suspension of distrust was not blind faith but more of an assessment and management which can evolve as illustrated in figure 2. In this way, the suspension of distrust should be considered as opportunities to build trust: an assimilation process. For the student, this process required perceptions of safety with acceptable belief structures along with information validity. An example of an information validity check illustrating a calculated assessment was, "have the good answer". In this way, information validity was both a trust building mechanism and a motivator for relationship building. Once motivated into the learning negotiation process, trust developed by successful conflict negotiation in helping to learn. This suggests that the creation of trust itself was motivating. In addition, the negotiations were a demonstration of teacher competence in which perceptions of benevolence could be observed particularly with emotions; 46 percent of all references had emotional content. This successful relationship building with and around the subject matter may be what is termed the development of emotional trust; trust that develops over time with repeated positive interactions (Rousseau et al., 1998). For the teacher, competence in helping to learn was the development of trust both calculated and emotional – trust that can shape the relationships in a classroom.
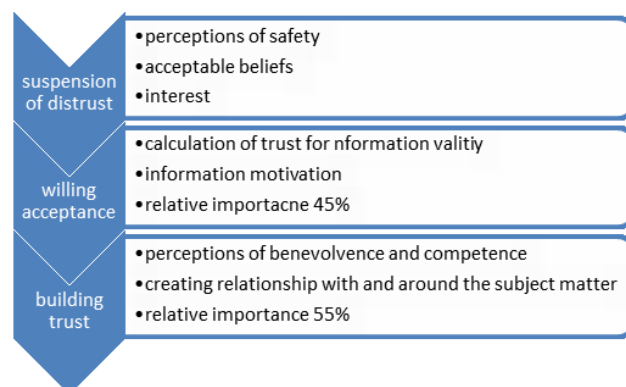

Fig. 2. Trust and relationship building.

Now to explicitly answer the second and third research questions concerning the relative importance of the two conflicts and the connections to teaching and learning: perception of information validity can affect up to 45 percent of the students' on whether to study and/or can 45 percent of a their learning ability. In a similar way, perception of a teacher's competence can affect up to 55 percent of the students' desire and/or ability to learn.

To conclude, the objectives of this research paper were to investigate conflict resolution, trust, and relationship building to give insight into the teaching learning process. Common mistakes in the negotiation process are failing to use correct strategy and / or bad timing (Wongleedee, 2012). The following example will demonstrate a possible timely strategy and also illustrate how conflict can be expressed, the first research question; if a student indicates that the class "is too serious" then there is stress in the learning environment; therefore, humour along with subject matter manipulation can be solutions. When problems exist in the classroom, perhaps it could be helpful to understand the situation in terms of relationships: conflict resolution and trust building.

6. Future studies

Because of the small sample size, this study should be replicated with a larger sample size in order to determine whether the results are repeatable and therefore to be able to generalize beyond the context of this study. In addition, this study could also be replicated with older graduate students to determine differences in motivations. Finally, the student to student relationships, which were omitted in this study, should be investigated.

Acknowledgement

References

Bereiter, C. & Scardamalia, M. (1993). *Surpassing Ourselves*. Chicago: Open Court publishing.

Chapman, A. (2012). *maslow hierarchy of needs*. Retrieved from http://www.businessballs.com/maslow.htm.

Crain, W. C., (1985). Kohlberg's Stages of Moral Development. In *Theories of Development,* (pp. 118-136). Prentice-Hall.

DeSteno, D. (2014). *Why Trust in Teachers Is Central to a Child's Academic Success*. Retrieved from http://www.huffingtonpost.com/david-desteno/why-early-childhood-education_b_4738206.html.

Dickie, J. P. (2014). What Do Students Want? A Coded Analysis. *International Science Indexи 8* (5), 817- 821.

Gambetta, D. (1988). *Trust: Making and breaking cooperative relations*. New York: Basil Blackwell.

Gottman, J. M. & DeClaire, J. (2001). *The relationship cure: A five-step guide for building connections with family, friends, and lovers*. New York: Crown Publishers.

Hosmer, L. T. (1995). Trust: The connecting link between organizational theory and philosophical ethics. *Academy of Management Review*, 20, 379-403.

Lewicki, R. J. & Tomlinson, E. C. (2003). *Trust and Trust Building*. Retrieved from http://www.beyondintractability.org/essay/trust-building

Lewicki, R. J., McAllister, D. J., & Bies, R. J. (1998). Trust and Distrust: New Relationships and Realities. *Academy of Management Review*, *23* (3), 438 – 458.

Longman (2000). *Advanced American Dictionary, Everything you need to succeed*. England: Pearson Education Limited.

Martin, G. (n. d.). *Notes on Willing Suspension of Disbelief*. Retrieved 2014 from http://decmber7th.org.nowsod/nowsod.pdf.

Mayer, R. C., Davis, J. H., & Schoorman, F. D. (1995). An integrative model of organizational trust. *Academy of Management Review*, *20*, 709-734.

Rousseau, D. M., Sitkin, S. B., Burt, R. S. & Camerer, C. (1998). Not so different after all: A cross-discipline view of trust, *Academy of Management Review, 23* (3), 393 – 404.

Segal, J. & Smith, M. (2014). *Conflict Resolution Skills: Building the Skills That Can Turn Conflicts into Opportunities*. Retrieved from http://www.helpguide.org/articles/relationships/conflict-resolution-skills.

Wongleedee, K. (2012). *Principles of Management in Globalization*. Bangkok: Suan Sunandha Rajabhat University Press.