RMIT University

Rosey Chang

When Adult Learners Argue: A Preliminary Approach to Conflict in a TAFE Writing Workshop

Writers, especially beginner writers, have a tendency to identify closely with their written work. This can lead to conflict in a writing workshop situation where learners are encouraged to critique each other's work in public. This paper presents an example of conflict in a TAFE classroom, and then discusses how adult learning principles and approaches to conflict resolution can inform our understanding of potential conflict in the adult writing workshop.

When Adult Learners Argue

Imagine: you've shunted through after-work traffic, finally persuaded the photocopier to cough up, and somehow slid in front of your class on time. Eleven faces look back at you.

You face the board, writing a warm-up exercise: "I never knew his name, but…" Time to breathe, sip coffee. Ball pens scratch away.

Not many straight from school this year, although you enjoy their belly rings, bare hips and sense of possibility. Still, mature-age students always like the Creative Writing evening class. They're a mixed bunch at TAFE: Spiros, the boiler maker, is a real stirrer; Hiroki the businessman is always late; and Whitney's doing a PhD in English Lit. during the day.

When they get to the bottom of their page, it's pens down. You ask Tegan to read her passage. An adopted woman imagines her father. Tegan's confidence in her own voice is growing.

Yan reads, too. True to form, a new vampire recalls his initiator. At least he's moved on from werewolves.

Now on to workshop the assignment. James reads out his "faction": gangsters, machettes, murder.

Next it's Carmel's turn to read. She juts out her chin and smiles slightly as she distributes her piece to the group. Carmel is an example of why you wanted to become an adult educator. Her people skills are a little left-of-centre and she lacks confidence, but she's keen. At home with young kids, she must read two novels a week. (Don't know how she makes the time. You imagine her collapsed on top of the washing machine, deaf to its thrumming, an open novel beside her.) She's a sensitive reader; she can pinpoint the weakness in a text every time. Throughout the semester you've seen her belief in herself strengthen.

Tegan calls out, "Carmel, this lay-out is great."

Her piece looks like a newspaper article with columns and a pop-out box. Carmel smiles to herself again and starts reading to the group. She describes a family who immigrated from Asia ten years ago. We visit their home and hear about their transition to Australia.

Charlotte kicks off the workshop discussion. "So Carmel, what do you want to do with this article?"

"I dunno," Carmel pauses. "I was thinking I'd try to get it printed in the Melbourne Times or something."

Charlotte raises an eyebrow and says nothing. Whitney points out some ambiguous wording.

Charlotte, who happens to be of Asian descent, brings the discussion around to a paragraph about appearance and language. Carmel responds defensively.

Charlotte is interpreting an aspect of Carmel's piece as racist. Her criticism becomes more focused and academic. Her sense of affront barbs her language.

"What do you mean, if you spoke to him on the phone you wouldn't have guess he was Asian?"

Carmel takes the criticism personally. She says in a small voice, "All I meant was…"

Sitting next to Charlotte, Laylin begins to back up her criticisms. Again Carmel defends herself weakly.

You know Carmel didn't intend to be racist. She just wasn't able to think through the implications of her language.

You try to stop the exchange, referring to Carmel's own ethnic heritage as a point of common ground rather than a point of conflict. But Charlotte resists as if you've suggested that her opinion isn't valid. She swoops onto another point. Carmel explains her decision-making, but Charlotte doesn't yield ground. Laylin nods her agreement. Carmel is silent and looks as if she's wilting.

Then Carmel lifts her face and shrieks to the ceiling, "I'll never be able to write anything!" She starts to cry.

You say, "Let's take our break now, people." And Carmel scoots out the door and doesn't return after coffee break.

Writing Workshops and Adult Learning Principles

One way to approach the opening example is to start from basic adult learning principles and consider how these apply to the situation. A significant body of literature discusses the principles of good practice in the adult classroom. These include approaching adult learners as self-directed, goal-oriented, problem solvers (Knowles 1990). Teaching that incorporates adult learning principles leads to approaches with flexibility towards learners' needs, that foster a spirit of collaboration and that employ curriculum relevant to learners' lives (Knowles 1990; Brookfield 1991; Imel 1998). At the centre of these approaches is the idea of student-centred teaching, which positions the student as the central focus of curriculum development and implementation.

Three adult learning principles, closely related to a student-centred approach, will be discussed in relation to conflict in the writing workshop:

- Creating a climate that supports and encourages learning
- Supporting self-directed learning
- Valuing and drawing upon learners' life experiences

Creating a Climate that Supports Learning

While it seems to be a basic point, clearly learners will have difficulty in an environment that does not support learning. If, as in the example, a student is distressed to the point where she is crying, she will not be able to participate positively in the learning activities for that day. Arguably, it is an educator's responsibility to ensure that learners feel free from attack and supported in their learning environment.

The value of an environment that supports learning is not only a common sense suggestion that is reinforced by literature on andragogy (e.g. Imel passim), but is bolstered by our growing understanding of how the brain works. Reardon suggests that under a perceived threat - "potential physical harm, intellectual, emotional or social threats" - the brain uses fewer neural networks while thinking, thus diminishing vital processes in learning such as analysis, synthesis and evaluation (Reardon 17).

A supportive, stress-free environment allows students to learn more effectively on many levels. This does not mean that instructional material cannot be intellectually challenging, but that it needs to be introduced in an environment where learners feel safe and respected. It is respect, namely a mutual respect between learners and the learner and educator, that is central to student-centred approaches. Nuckles describes this as a pivotal aspect of student-centred, humanistic education: "Humanistic education values the student as a whole person, a person who deserves to be treated with respect and dignity" (Nuckles 5).

One of the challenges for an adult educator is to operate with authority in the classroom while maintaining an attitude of respect towards learners. It is tempting for educators, especially those with previous teaching experience in the secondary or primary school systems, to revert to a paradigm of authority where the educator gains status by undermining the learners' status. This approach can manifest as the educator adopting a condescending tone throughout learning activities, or chastising learners who choose not to undertake learning tasks away from the classroom. However, such an approach fails to recognise that, unlike primary and secondary students, adult learners bring rich, adult life experiences and commitments to the classroom.

In a Certificate IV in Professional Writing and Editing TAFE semester intake, it is possible for a majority of students enrolling to be mature-age, adult learners. Of these, a portion may have made the commitment to study full-time, but most will be studying on top of other life commitments. The evening schedules for writing courses around Australia show that part-time adult learners often choose to give up their nights to explore their potential as writers. This means they give up tucking their children into bed, hearing about their partner's day, or even enjoying some precious time alone. Adult learners attend class for various reasons. Some learners may come to writing classes to gain new confidence in their leisure pursuit, to train for a new career, or to fulfil a dream to see their name in print. Others may not know why they are there, but are excited by taking a new direction.

All learners, including adult learners, bring their whole selves to the classroom, complete with emotions and needs. When someone dashes into class late, appearing flustered, the adult educator cannot know if he or she has been arguing with a spouse or simply stuck in traffic. The learner can bring into the classroom high levels of emotional distress and disquiet that originate in other aspects of their lives. This has the potential to fuel a conflict situation or inflame arguments that might appear out of proportion in the classroom context.

The reality of adult learners' lives, with complex and sometimes distressing commitments, creates a greater need for educators to approach their relationship with learners with sensitivity. Educators who posit themselves as the domineering school ma'am or headmaster may find that adult learners do not appreciate a rigid approach. Adult learners are likely to prefer educators to see themselves as facilitators rather than dictators. (This is arguably also true for younger learners.) In the facilitation model, all those involved - the writer-learner, educator and other learners - have a valuable contribution to make. This approach of the educator as a facilitator does not lessen the educator's authority to lead. In essence, in the adult writing class situation, the educator is leading the class due to their expertise as a practicing writer and their understanding of how to assist learners to gain appropriate skills and knowledge. They may not be older than all enrolled learners, possess more degrees or have broader life experience - but they can help them to learn to strengthen their writing, and their status and authority is based in this fact. With this authority comes responsibility.

One of an educator's key responsibilities is to engage with notions and strategies that will create a climate to support learning. Adult learning is best supported in an environment that recognises the complex demands of adult life and the subsequent ways these might play out in the classroom. Successful educators respect these complex demands and create space for them to move, perhaps safely let off steam, without backing them into a corner. In respecting learners' life situations - even without knowing the details - the educator respects the learners themselves. This notion of respect leads into where respect interconnects with approaches to perceive and manage conflict.

Conflict

While conflict can arise in any learning situation, the potential is arguably increased in a writing workshop where the focus is on learners critiquing other learners' written work. Donohue and Kolt define conflict as: "A situation in which interdependent people express differences in satisfying their individual needs and interests, and they experience interference from each other in accomplishing these goals" (Donohue and Kolt 40). *Needs* refer to a "basic desire tied to self-concept or self-esteem", while *interests* are those things that one desires but are perceived as separate from one's self-concept (Donohue and Kolt 5). In other words, conflict is the resistance against another who provokes a situation that runs counter to a person's sense of self.

In an adult writing workshop, one would hope that learners' self-concept allows them to believe that they should be treated with respect. To do otherwise would violate their sense of who they are. Within the example, Carmel's self-concept was closely aligned with the publicly-perceived quality of her written work. She interpreted the criticism of her work as criticism of herself and her ability to write, in absolute terms. Carmel's perception was not unusual. Many writers, especially beginner writers, have a tendency to identify closely with their writing. Garry Disher says of some beginner writers: "They see writing as 'self-

expression', and extension of the self, and that this makes it somehow intrinsically worthwhile. They take criticism of their writing as criticism of themselves personally" (Disher 8). Goldberg also has clear advice for writers with this kind of attitude: "Don't identify too strongly with your work. Stay fluid behind those black-and-white words. They are not you" (Goldberg 33).

It is understandable that some learners might have placed a great deal of effort into their piece and feel pleased with the outcome. For such learners, even constructive criticism might hurt their sense of accomplishment or competency. Zemelmen and Daniels describe a writing workshop situation where "…the writer doesn't want to accept criticism readers have given. This is a sensitive issue, because although it's important for students to feel ownership, simply liking what one has written doesn't make it communicate successfully" (Zemelmen and Daniels 191). In this situation, the learner-writer does not separate the sense of ownership and accomplishment that can come from producing written work from the act of individual readers gaining meaning from the work. When a fellow learner says in the public forum of the workshop that the meaning he or she gained varied from the writer's intended meaning, the danger is that the writer could feel that their image of themselves is under threat, and could react defensively or respond with a verbal attack.

In this way, the struggle against a threat to the self-concept is at the heart of the paradigm of conflict described by Donohue and Kolt. This paradigm sees conflict as "you attacking me". However, there is an alternative: a more communal and collaborative paradigm for understanding conflict. Tjosvold's (1993) theory of cooperative conflict provides an alternative framework in which conflict is not a struggle between opposing parties, but a problem to be shared by all. Tjosvold shifts the emphasis from individuals in opposition, to a group in cooperation. This approach suits the creative endeavour of a writing workshop, where all those involved can be focused on finding a creative solution to a shared goal - helping the writer to communicate as he or she intends - just as they are focused on creating their individual written work. Tjosvold notes, "When people believe their goals are cooperative, they are committed to promoting each other and helping each other to be effective" (Tjosvold 8). While it is easy to forget in the heat of the moment, Tjosvold's approach reminds us that we have choices in how we behave, even in conflict. Tjosvold offers us a powerful choice: whether we see ourselves as separate from or connected to others. This again relates back to notions of respect. It provides the opportunity to ask: Do I respect and value the relationship between you and me enough to build a collaborative solution to this conflict?

Workshops with Common Goals

A broad, common goal for a writing workshop could be to understand and respect the writer's aim, and then to use readers' comments as a way to work together, supporting the writer to meet their aim. A common goal such as this may be something an educator chooses to make explicit by discussing and brainstorming with a class. For some educators, the common goal may be implicit in their manner and teaching style without needing to put it into so many words. Others may benefit from open discussion.

In addition to a broad goal of improving learners' written work, a common goal may also include mastering a specific written genre or working towards a political agenda. Kamler writes about a writing workshop for women aged 60 to 85 years where the shared goal was to challenge common perceptions of older women:

> While some of the women had previously attended creative
> writing workshops, our approach was different in its critical
> orientation. We shared a political agenda with the women - to
> rewrite negative and diminishing narratives of aging. Together
> we were committed to develop richer and more complex
> perspectives about what it meant to grow older. (Kamler 233)

Personal Styles and Strategies in Conflict Resolution

The approach that educators and individuals adopt towards conflict influences the outcomes. Some approaches are more successful than others. In this, it can be useful to become aware of personal styles and strategies in conflict resolution and to reflect on past experiences and behaviour. Within conflict resolution, "style" is a person's overall tendency in conflict and "strategy" describes the method they use to approach conflict on a specific occasion (Braman 32). A person might switch between styles and strategies in different situations.

*Styles and Strategies in Conflict Resolution**

STYLE	STRATEGY
Aggression	Use verbal abuse or physical violence
Avoidance	Walk away
Compromise	Make personal sacrifices to find resolution
Negotiation	Wheel and deal
Collaboration	Share or find solutions with mutual benefits

*Adapted from Braman 1998.

In the opening example of this paper, the educator exhibited avoidance (by not becoming involved) and collaboration (by referring to Carmel and Charlotte sharing aspects of their backgrounds). However, in combination these styles were not successful. The main difficulty here was the level of avoidance employed. Tjosvold argues that "conflict itself does not destroy; it is the avoidance and other destructive ways of handling important conflicts that undermine our well-being, confidence and effectiveness" (Tjosvold 3). Events in the opening example may have played out differently if the educator had been mentally prepared for conflict and had collected an imaginary kitbag of specific approaches and methods for conflict resolution. When combined with appropriate adult-learning principles, a kitbag can lay the foundation for successfully responding to potential conflict in the writing workshop.

Approaching Potential Conflict in the Writing Workshop - Laying the Foundation

The adult writing workshop provides educators with the opportunity to encourage self-directed learning and to value learners' life experiences during the initial classes when they lay the foundations for the rest of the semester. This can by done by using several approaches including:

- Asking students what they would like, want and need
- Providing strategies for giving and receiving criticism
- Brainstorming approaches to conflict

- Establishing guidelines

1. Asking Learners what they would Like, Want and Need

Adult learners often have a clear idea of why they are attending a writing class or what they would like to gain. Educators can support and encourage self-directed learning by asking learners what they would like, want or need from a class (Nuckles passim) and building this into their curriculum. Learners may be asked through group discussion or a questionnaire, which could also feed into the creation of workshop guidelines discussed below. Questionnaires enable students who may be reluctant to present opinions in front of the class to register their views. Often a number of students in a writing workshop at TAFE level have attended workshop-style classes before. These and other students come with a rich background of past experiences, expectations and preferred approaches. The group could discuss these. There might be alternative workshop approaches that they would like to try.

2. Strategies for Giving and Receiving Criticism

Depending on the skill level of learners, they might benefit from ideas on how to give and receive criticism in a workshop. In this discussion it is useful to draw on the previous ideas of recognising the writer as separate from the written work, and the group aim of collaborating towards a common goal. The following techniques can also be of benefit (partially adapted from Zelmelmen and Daniels 190-191):

- Dividing a large group into smaller groups to discuss work
- For learners with low levels of literacy, distributing a sheet of issues to consider when critiquing
- Suggesting the writer request specific feedback on particular aspects of the work
- Prompting both positive and negative critique
- Encouraging critique that emphasises the subjectivity of the reader by using "I" statements - "When I read it I thought…" instead of "What's really wrong with this is…"
- Encouraging writers to retain agency by choosing whether to act on the criticism or not.

3. Brainstorming Approaches to Conflict

It is useful to have an explicit discussion about the potential for conflict in a writing workshop. The discussion can include issues such as the writer identifying closely with written work and a reader delivering insensitive critique. Again, the educator can draw on learners' life experience. There may be learners who have expertise or experience in conflict resolution, psychology or teamwork in the classroom. These learners can share their insights and past experiences in conflict resolution.

Short activities can be used to brainstorm approaches to conflict. Hypotheticals, based on scenarios such as the example in this article, could be distributed on paper for learners to brainstorm possible approaches in small groups and report back. These could be generated by informal conversation with other educators. For example, the author has learned of one occasion when two male learners came to blows in class over a critique. While this is an extreme example, hypotheticals can give learners the chance to consider this and other conflict situations before they occur. For classes where the curriculum allows few opportunities to add extra learning activities, the hypothetical exercise could be linked to writing exercises such as describing a scene that conveys building emotions, focusing on dialogue, or experimenting with structure such as a "choose your own adventure" format.

4. Establishing Guidelines

A group discussion of hypotheticals can lead into the class establishing guidelines for the writing workshop. The act of devising the guidelines together invites the group to take collective responsibility for the atmosphere they create in the workshop. All learners can gain a sense of ownership over the classroom environment. This discussion could include issues such as:

- What is the group's common goal in the writing workshop?
- What kind of experiences would we like to promote and avoid?
- How would the group like to approach conflict situations?

An example list follows.

Let's create a writing workshop where we:

- respect the writer's aims and work together to meet them so we can all learn to be better writers
- can discuss the strengths and weaknesses of written work with sensitivity
- focus on the written work, not the writer
- discuss major issues in spoken critiques and keep details (spelling, grammar, punctuation etc) to written comments
- value and enjoy our differences - not everyone has to have the same opinion
- are careful, encouraging and kind
- can laugh and have fun
- remember that the writer can choose whether or not to take criticism on board
- protect each other from verbal or physical attacks
- agree that anyone can call: Time out!

Time Out

A "time out" technique provides a release valve for potentially harmful conflict. In the example, Carmel could only express her discomfort through crying. It would have been preferable for her to be able to say something before then. She needed a way to say, "Stop!" Again, drawing on the group's rich life experiences in discussion, learners may suggest time-out techniques that have worked for them in the past. The group could also discuss the kinds of situations that might call for a time-out. These might include situations where someone:

- feels distressed; or
- senses that someone else is distressed.

The group could discuss the language and application of a time-out. An alternative term might be more suitable. (Influenced by recent youth radio, one suggestion was: "Don't go there!") The group might give each other permission to ask, "Would you like some time out?" The learner who has been asked could then indicate whether he or she wants to continue. Time-out might develop into short hand for crossing into dangerous territory. One group member might caution another, "You're getting close to time-out."

Workshop Experiments - the Rule of Silence

The writing workshop provides the opportunity for adult educators to experiment with approaches to promote a supportive environment and

successfully manage conflict. Two suggestions to experiment with are:

- The rule of silence; and
- Limiting performance.

One approach designed to prevent conflict is Ursula Le Guin's (1998) rule of silence. The rule compels the writer to receive criticism in a workshop without responding. Le Guin argues that silence forces the learner to focus on the substance of the critique rather than on how they will respond. Arguably, silence could also diminish the potential for discussion to snowball into conflict.

Le Guin explains her writing workshop process:

> The rule of silence seems arbitrary. It isn't. It is an essential element of the process.
> It's almost impossible for an author whose work is being criticised not to be on the defensive, eager to explain, answer, point out - 'Oh, but see, what I meant was…' 'Oh, I was going to do that in the next draft…' If you can't do this you won't waste time (yours and theirs) trying to do it. Instead, you will listen. …All the successful groups I know also are strict about keeping each critique brief, and implacable about silencing the author. Adhesive tape is usually not necessary. (Le Guin 155-156)

Importantly, Le Guin does not prohibit discussion. However, she suggests that discussion should occur after critiquing and presumably be more wide ranging. In this context, silence is also a useful technique to encourage writers to focus on their work as separate from themselves.

Workshop Experiments - Limiting Performance

Sometimes writing workshops do not operate with a sense of community, respect and mutual support. Instead they provide a forum for one-upmanship and destructive competition. In this context, the writing workshop becomes a place where learners undermine one another's successes through mean-spirited critiques or egotistical readings. Rather than the workshop as a place to learn together, it becomes a place to perform and show-off. One technique to limit this form of destructive performance is to encourage work to be read out by someone other than the writer. This has the added benefit of allowing the writer to hear how a fresh reader would interpret the written work.

Reflection on the Example

How could the educator in the opening example have approached the situation differently? The first challenge is to have the time to consider his or her kitbag of approaches towards conflict and therefore have already developed options. A small investment in time could be instrumental in gaining positive outcomes. The second challenge is to embrace the responsibility of leading the class through potential conflict - in part, by reflecting on a personal tendency to avoid conflict and the resulting consequences. Avoidance reaped few rewards in the example. The avoidance partially stemmed from concerns regarding the educator's role. In trying to avoid being perceived as a school ma'am or headmaster by the adult learners, the educator over-compensated by choosing to exercise no authority at all. Such a *laissez-faire* attitude, allowing adults to behave however they choose, fails to protect the more vulnerable party in a

conflict. In this and other examples, it would be preferable to lay the groundwork beforehand, have personal and class-based strategies in place, and be aware that how the educator behaves can influence a conflict situation a great deal.

Conclusion

It is the responsibility of the educator to create an environment that is safe and supports learning. While it is not reasonable to expect that a writing workshop can be free from conflict, educators can be armed with a working understanding of conflict and lay the groundwork for successful conflict resolution. Several useful ideas and technique for managing conflict include:

- Respecting adult learners' rich life experience and complex commitments
- Articulating and sharing a common goal
- Providing strategies for giving and receiving criticism
- Asking students what they would like, want and need
- Brainstorming approaches to conflict
- Establishing guidelines

References

Brookfield, S. D. (1991) *Understanding and Facilitating Adult Learning*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass. Return to article

Braman, O. R. (1998-1999) "Teaching Peace to Adults: Using Critical Thinking to Improve Conflict Resolution". *Adult Learning* 10, 2: 30-32. Return to article

Disher, G. (2001) *Writing Fiction: An Introduction to the Craft.* Sydney: Allen & Unwin. Return to article

Donohue, W. and Kolt, W. (1992) *Managing Interpersonal Conflict.* Newbury Park: Sage Publications. Return to article

Goldberg, N. (1986) *Writing Down the Bones: Freeing the Writer Within.* Boston: Shambhala. Return to article

Imel, S. (1998) *Using Adult Learning Principles in Adult Basic Literacy Education.* http://ericacve.org/docgen.asp?tbl=pab@ID=88 accessed 14 Jan 2003. Return to article

Kamler, B. (2001) "We're not nice little old ladies". *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy* 45, 3: 232-235. Return to article

Knowles, M. S. (1990) *The Adult Learner: A Neglected Species.* 4th edn. Houston: Gulf Publishing. Return to article

Le Guin, U. K. (1998) *Steering the Craft: Exercises and Discussions on Story Writing for the Lone Navigator or the Mutinous Crew.* Portland: The Eighth Mountain Press. Return to article

Nuckles, C. (1999) "Student-Centred Teaching: Making it Work". *Adult Learning* 11, 4: 5-6. Return to article

Reardon, M. (1999) "The Brain: Navigating the New Reality - An Exploration of Brain-Compatible Learning". *Adult Learning* 10, 2: 10-17. Return to article

Tjosvold, D. (1993) *Learning to Manage Conflict.* New York: Lexington Books. Return to article

Zemelmen, S. and Daniels, H. (1988) *A Community of Writers: Teaching Writing in the Junior and Senior High School.* Portsmouth: Heinemann. Return to article

Rosey Chang is a Melbourne-based educator and writer. She is currently working in adult education in the TAFE and higher education sectors. Her writing interests include young adult fiction, meditative writing practice and freelance journalism.