

Assertiveness, a key element to design conflict management strategies in students at Universidad Tecnológica de León

La asertividad, elemento clave para diseñar estrategias de gestión de conflictos en estudiantes de la Universidad Tecnológica de León

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Abstract

This article identifies elements to develop strategies that helps the teacher in the management of conflict in the classroom, so that the teaching-learning process is carried out in an environment of non-violence and peace. For this, a brief conceptual framework on conflict theory is proposed that justifies the establishment of three categories (communication, structure and personal variables) in order to serve as the basis for the design and application of a survey which was applied to the first semester students at Universidad Tecnológica de León (UTL), in the period September – December 2020. A synthesis of the survey results that highlighted the importance of assertiveness as a key element or tool for adequate conflict management is presented. Based on the results, the work concludes with the presentation of some elements for the development of didactic strategies that allow the adequate management of conflicts in the classroom.

Conflict, Communication, Assertiveness

Resumen

El presente artículo identifica elementos para elaborar estrategias que ayuden al docente en el manejo del conflicto en el aula, con la finalidad de que el proceso de enseñanza-aprendizaje se lleve a cabo en un ambiente de no violencia y paz. Para ello, se plantea un breve marco conceptual sobre la teoría del conflicto que justifica el establecimiento de tres categorías (Comunicación, estructura y variables personales) que sirvió de base para el diseño y aplicación de una encuesta que se aplicó al estudiantado de primer cuatrimestre de la Universidad Tecnológica de León (UTL), en el periodo septiembre – diciembre 2020. Se presenta una síntesis de los resultados de la encuesta que resaltaron la importancia de la asertividad como elemento clave o herramienta para el adecuado manejo de conflictos. A partir de los resultados, el trabajo concluye con la presentación de algunos elementos para el desarrollo de estrategias didácticas que permitan el manejo adecuado de los conflictos en el aula.

Conflicto, Comunicación, Asertividad

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Introduction

Conflict is considered an aspect of human nature and cannot be avoided, so it is important to identify elements that help us mediate it and thus obtain positive aspects of it.

The widespread idea persists that conflict is destructive, and few speak of its potential for building a culture of peace. The origin of the term alludes precisely to its negative aspect: from the Latin *conflictus*, formed by the prefix *con*, which translates as company or union; and from the participle *flictus*, which means "blow", so when joining the elements you have: "blow together", which in the context in which the word arises refers to the blows propitiated between at least two people. Hence conflict is commonly associated with fighting, but that is only its explicit manifestation that can be expressed to varying degrees, from passive offense to war between nations.

The classroom is a propitious scenario to interact, doing team or groupwork, a situation that can lead to conflicts, and even more so when going through something atypical such as the Covid 19 pandemic. Therefore, it is important to complete studies that help identify key elements for the design of strategies that support teachers and students to mediate the conflicts that arise.

Problem statement

Understanding the sources of conflict is essential to address the problem at its root, and thus, build an environment of peace that avoids future conflicts or favorably resolves existing ones; in other words, prevent two or more people from getting into the fight. However, understanding the origin of conflict is a complex task, since it involves studying in depth the subject of all conflicts that by nature is complex: the human being.

Objective

Identifying elements that support the design of strategies for conflict management in the classroom, from the identification of the students' perception at Universidad Tecnológica de León.

Theoretical framework

In the period September-December 2020, a survey was applied with the Associate Professional Program in first quarter groups, with the intention of knowing their *a priori* perception of the conflict, to subsequently implement didactic strategies. To address the topic, first some aspects of the sociological theory of conflict will be briefly described, as a theoretical reference; subsequently, the contributions of Stephen P. Robbins in his analysis of conflicts in organizations will be reviewed. Below is a summary of the results of the survey applied to students and the categories of the proposals made by students for the conflict resolution strategy to, finally, conclude with a key element that should be included in the strategies and an outline of didactic proposal for conflict management and, thus, promote a culture of non-violence and peace.

Synthesis of conflict theory

Conflict theory has its origins in the ideas of Karl Marx. For this thinker, conflict is the result of the struggle for property, specifically between those who own the means of production (upper class) and those who only have their labor power (lower class). According to Marx, this struggle explains the historical evolution when he affirms "History is the history of the class struggle", where the upper classes have always sought at all costs to maintain their *status quo* by alienating the lower classes. According to this idea, conflict is inherent in social life, unless the lower class breaks this cycle and appropriates the means of production, thereby ending social classes and thus the source of conflict. Marx adds that, to achieve a classless society, the path is none other than a drastic revolution, which can even involve violence (Cadena, 2018).

Marx's position centered on property is typical of an industrial society, but it does not hold up in the post-industrial era, characterized by information science and technology that markedly blurs the social classes to which Marx referred.

Dahrendorf (1992) observes that property alone is not sufficient to grant the political and social power necessary to perpetuate the alienating model of the upper class over the lower class. In post-industrial society we speak rather of groups of power and domination and dominated groups. For Dahrendorf (1992), a person has power when he is able to make himself obeyed, even by force; and you have dominance when you get the same thing, but by legal means. According to this new vision, conflict arises not from the difference in economic status, but from the social divergence between those who seek to perpetuate their capacity for power and dominance, and those who question those aspirations.

Marx and Dahrendorf maintain, in the end, the cyclical nature of conflict, that is, that to end the upper class (Marx) or the domination groups (Dahrendorf), the lower or dominated classes must rebel, there is no other way; but this idea of rebellion reaffirms the disruptive nature of conflict. Given this position, Lewis Coser (1970) in his book *New contributions to the theory of social conflict* analyzes conflict not only in its negative aspect, but highlighting its functionality for social stability. Among the functions of conflict, Coser highlights the connective and identifying function, that is, the possibility of establishing relationships among the members of a group, as well as interactions with another group. Thus arises the consciousness of group belonging: "We"; as well as the group of non-belonging: "the Others". The relationship between these groups is not necessarily one of power and dominance, sometimes the Others can be seen as role models. In other words, without conflict, cohesion among the members of a group would not be possible.

For his part, John Rex (1985) includes new variables to understand the mechanics of conflict: expectations, feelings and culture. Regarding expectations, the conflictive relationship arises in two phases: the first occurs when expectations are communicated; the second is when sanctions are imposed to enforce expectation. If one of the parties does not adequately communicate its expectations or they are interpreted negatively by the others, a crisis of legitimacy arises, which is complicated when, in addition, sanctions are established for compliance, since people will seek to reject compliance.

Faced with this situation, Rex speaks of "negotiation situations", in which rational arguments are necessary to convince others that there are higher interests that must be complied with and that, therefore, it is necessary to recognize the legitimacy of the leader. At this point, a key factor for negotiation is the favorable management of affective aspects, the use of feelings powerfully influences the management of conflict. Finally, Rex also recognizes that conflicts acquire different connotations according to the ideologies of each culture.

Conflict at the level of organizations

According to previous theories, it is clear that conflict is the result of interaction between two or more groups when the parties have different interests and expectations regarding the same issue. At the level of organizations, Robbins (2004) mentions that a conflict is a process where it is perceived that a party affected, affects or will affect some interest that is had. On the other hand, Funquen (2003) refers that conflict is the result of the incompatibility between objectives, behaviors or perceptions between people or groups that have opposite goals.

According to Robbins (2004), the origin of conflicts can be classified into three categories: communication, structure and personal variables.

Communication is the process where ideas, thoughts, and feelings are shared. Several elements are involved in this process: sender, receiver, channel, code and context. The **sender** is the one who sends the message; the **receiver** is the one who receives the message; the **context** is the set of physical, social, historical, psychological or cultural circumstances in which the communicative process occurs; the **message** is what you want to transmit to the other or others; the **channel**, that it is the vehicle (natural, such as oral, written or kinesthetic expression, or artificial as an electronic medium) by means of which the message is transmitted; The **code** is the set of symbols that are used to convey the message, such as language.

In each of the elements of the communicative process there may be a failure that prevents or hinders the purpose of communication. Both sender and receiver, for example, may have speech or hearing problems (physiological barriers). There is also difficulty if they do not use the same code, either because they do not share the language or do not understand the meaning of the words they use (semantic barriers). In the same vein, the communicative process would not be fully fulfilled if the contextual referent is different for each of the parties (cultural and social barriers); nor would communication occur if some physical obstacle distorts the channel and hinders the transmission or reception of the message (physical barriers).

The set of these barriers is called **noise**, in the sense that it interferes with the communication process. To achieve the purpose of communication, which is the exchange of ideas and feelings, **feedback** is necessary, not as the simple response of the receiver to the sender, but to verify if all participants understand the communicative intentions of all. When the receiver receives the initial message, he decodes and interprets what in his opinion the sender said, but this interpretation can be far from the communicative intention of the sender, because there may be a lot of noise (physiological, physical, cultural, semantic) and, if the pertinent clarifications are not made, the conflict arises that could evolve into violence. Feedback can help corroborate whether what you want to convey arrived correctly (Verderber, 2006).

The category of **structure**, according to Robbins (2004), refers to the clarity and compatibility of the objectives to be achieved, the goals to be met, the specialization of tasks assigned to the members, the rules, policies, clear and accepted norms and limits, leadership styles appropriate to the group's needs, degree and dependence among the members. If these elements, are not clear, accepted or in conformity, might cause continuous conflicts.

The **personal variables** are the value systems that each person has, they are the rules of social and moral conduct that the individual has. They are prejudices, in addition to the way of being that characterizes each individual and that makes him different from others. Robbins emphasizes that (Robbins, 2004, p. 400):

"...in studies of social conflict, the most important and perhaps the most ignored variable lies in the difference in value systems"

Methodology

The surveys were applied in the period September-December 2020, to 1,215 first-quarter students at Universidad Tecnológica de León (UTL), with the intention of identifying their perception of the conflict according to the categories indicated by Robbins⁵, that is, to detect if most of their conflicts are due to personal or structural variables, from there, to design strategies for conflict management in the classroom.

Sample selection and application

The UTL received in its three campuses (Central, Campus II and Acámbaro) 3,000 new students to complete an enrollment of 8,532 in the quarter September- December 2020 (Source: UTL School Services, 2022). The sample was considered only with those of the first quarter since it was intended to know the perception of the conflict before implementing any strategy for its management, so that later they could identify if these strategies had a positive impact or not.

This survey was carried out in the Sociocultural Training course, a subject whose purpose is the formation of living-together and being skills. In the subject planning provided by the General Coordination of Technological Universities (CGUT by its acronym in Spanish), it is indicated that the competence to be developed by students at the end of the four modules of the subject, is (CGUT, 2018):

"Act with proactive, creative and entrepreneurial values and attitudes, in their personal, social, and organizational development, in harmony with their environment"

The first-quarter students of both shifts at Campuses I and II were requested by their Sociocultural course professors to answer the survey; thus, 1,215 out of 3,000 alumni answered the survey, which represented 40.5%, being in turn 14.24% of the student population if all quarters were considered. Only those from the Central Campus and those from Campus II, both located in León, Guanajuato, participated in this sample, and it was pending to include the 177 students of recent admission at Acámbaro Campus. The information is shown in Table 1. Sociodemographic data.

Students surveyed (out of 3000)	Gender	Shift	Campus
1215	F (from 1321)	613 Morning	1038 Campus central
	M (from 1679)	602 Afternoon	154 Campus II
		23 Despressurized evening	347
Total	1215	Total	1215

Table 1 Sociodemographic data

Responses to identify elements that help in conflict management

The conflict perception survey consisted of 38 items; 37 multiple choice and 1 open-ended question. With the information obtained, the general results were analyzed, then items that provided information to identify necessary elements were grouped in the design of strategies for conflict management in the classroom. Finally, a classification was made based on the answers given to the open question: *“Do you have any proposal to improve the situation of the conflict presented among your classmates?”* The latter question was important because it defined the key element for the design of strategies, since it corroborated with the observations made in the analysis what the key element was in order to be implemented in the didactic strategies for conflict management.

Most students perceive conflict as something negative and that they should avoid it. According to the results, 81% of respondents responded that they associate it with the words fight, competition, dispute and/or disagreement, and only 19% as an area of opportunity. 69.7% answered that conflict generates more problems and 31.3% an opportunity.¹²

Action in the face of conflict

Almost 70% of the surveyed population considered that it is better to avoid conflict, with the aim of maintaining a good relationship in the group, and, in the event that they inevitably have to face the conflict, 76% said they would seek a solution that indicates commitment of the parties, 7% mentioned that they would seek help from third parties to solve it, 10% said they would maintain and defend their position, 6% would insist on ignoring the situation and not giving it importance, and only 1% said they would give up their position in order to end the conflict³⁴⁵.

As for how to intervene, when students detect a conflict between their peers, 33.2% said they would⁶ confront the parties in a neutral position, 36.5% said they would talk to each party involved separately, 23.2% prefer to ignore the fact and continue with their activities, 6% said they would try to take advantage of the situation for the benefit of all, and only 0.5% said they would try to profit for personal gain. When students are inevitably involved in a conflict, 80% of respondents said that they do face it, although it is unknown so far how they do it, that is, if passively, passive-aggressively, aggressively or assertively.⁷

Communication, control of emotions and personality

Regarding the variable "Communication", 61% of respondents mentioned that they promote dialogue between members of the group when a conflict is generated, 27% said that they promote it on some occasions, 8% mentioned that almost never and 5% that never. Another important aspect is the control of emotions in conflict and 95% of respondents mentioned that they agree with it.⁸⁹

¹ Question 5. In your concept of conflict, you associate the word...

² Question 6. For you, a conflict generates ...

³ Question 8. Conflict is a situation that we must avoid whenever possible.

⁴ Question 11. You avoid conflict to maintain a good relationship with your group.

⁵ Question 17. How do I act when I have a conflict with my group mates?

⁶ Question 18. How do I act when I detect a conflict between my classmates in the UTL student community?

⁷ Question 19. When there is a conflict in which you see yourself included, you face it.

⁸ Question 21. You encourage dialogue between the members of your group if a conflict is generated...

They were also asked if personality influences the generation of conflict and 79% mentioned agreeing with this statement.¹⁰

Personal variables

Regarding whether beliefs about gender¹¹, social status¹², ideology¹³ or perception of someone in the group¹⁴, the responses showed a notorious "neither agree nor disagree". However, for the research team, it is necessary to work on these answers in a second moment, because with the information collected it is not possible to know how the students conceive these personal variables. What is highlighted is that 89% of the surveyed population were in complete agreement with the idea that in the middle of a conflict, the partners' rights must be respected, only 2% said no, and 9% preferred to maintain a neutral position.

Structure

It was mentioned earlier that structure refers to the establishment of objectives and rules, to the planning and distribution of work. 50% of respondents did consider that lack of planning¹⁶ and disorganization¹⁷ are definitely factors that generate conflicts. A very interesting question, that goes hand in hand with all this research, is the one that refers to virtual classes and their influence on generating disorganization in collaborative work and, therefore, giving rise to conflicts¹⁸, almost 50% said they agreed.

Proposal by the students of strategies of solution or mediation in the face of the conflict

As the last item of the survey, the students were asked to make a proposal that could improve the situation of the conflict arising with their classmates; being an open question, the students proposed alternatives of all kinds which were classified into the following categories:

Category	Alumni(s)	%
They did not make a proposal	663	54.56%
Assertiveness	248	20.41%
Communication	111	9.13%
Structure	78	6.41%
Virtuality (return to face-to-face classes)	39	3.20%
Emotional intelligence	24	1.97%
Personal variables	24	1.97%
Activities of coexistence	19	1.15%
Request for mediators	9	0.74%
Total	1215	99.8%

Table 2 Categories of proposals by students for conflict resolution

According to the classification of proposals made by the students, assertiveness is the category that stands out for conflict management, and not only because it has been expressed explicitly, but because it is finally implicitly present in other categories: communication, structure, personal variables, coexistence activities and request for mediators.

Results

Assertiveness as a tool for conflict management

The communication strategies that are considered most effective are those related to assertiveness and active listening (Boqué, 2011). The objective of the assertive communication style is that the person is able to express themselves adequately when interacting, without attacking or allowing their rights to be respected (Generalitat Valencia, 2006).

According to Corrales, (2017) assertive communication has to do with the ability to express oneself verbally and preverbally in a way appropriate to culture and situations.

Professor Claudia Libertad Orta Caloca (2020), from the Universidad Autónoma de Tamaulipas, in her conference "Emotional assertiveness", in October 2020, directly relates assertiveness with emotional intelligence, as she mentions that in the nineties the concept of emotional intelligence emerged as an ability to recognize, perceive and value one's own emotions, as well as to regulate and express them at the right time and in a relevant way.

⁹ Question 23. Controlling emotions is critical to conflict management.
¹⁰ Question 24. Personality influences the generation of conflict.

Which contributes to the person generating attitudes and thoughts that strengthen self-esteem as an instrument of healthy defense in their right to live with quality in any social context. Then, an assertive behavior implies acting with transparency, honesty and harmony that consciously and unconsciously is being communicated to others, through their opinions and ideas, but does not harm a third party.

According to the above, the conflicts that arise in the classroom, both face-to-face and virtual, in times of pandemic or not, require that the parties involved be assertive, that they have adequate and effective communication, that everyone's opinions are heard and respected; and in this way reach agreements. Communication plays an important role, hence it is required to be **assertive**, and this is the key piece as a tool to achieve actions that help the management or mediation of the conflict. This reaffirms what is mentioned in the fourth pillar of education *Learning to live together* that refers to knowing how to live with the people around, to developing interrelation skills (Barragán, 2019).

The origin of the word assertiveness is from the Latin *asserere* and *assertum*, which means to **affirm or defend** according to Robredo (1995). Therefore, an assertive person is sure of what he says and defends what he feels or thinks, always respecting the rights of others.

When the person does not affirm or defend his rights, we speak of passive behavior; whereas, on the contrary, if you assert or defend your rights by trampling on the rights of others, it is aggressive behavior. The middle point is assertive behavior, which expresses what you feel and believe in a clear and honest way, asserting your own rights as those of others (Gaeta, 2009). According to Coromac (2014), assertiveness supports relationships to be more functional, direct and authentic. There is a work carried out by the Ministry of Education (MINEDUC, 2011), where they propose that assertiveness allows citizens to communicate their feelings and ideas, defend their rights, raise their needs and interests respecting others and themselves, so assertiveness, in addition to helping in the mediation of the conflict also supports the exercise of one's own rights and respect those of others. (Coromac, 2014)

The Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs of Spain (2004) mentions:

"Assertive behavior does not always result in the absence of conflict between the two parties, but its objective is the potentiation of favorable consequences and the minimization of unfavorable ones."

Rocío Raquel de León M. (2016) in her thesis entitled "Assertive discipline and the development of skills for coexistence" mentions that assertive discipline is very convenient because it favors the promotion of respect to others, dialogue, affective bonds, teamwork, assuming responsibilities and commitments and firmness of character.

Assertiveness includes a series of rights, among which are: consider your own needs, change your mind, express your ideas and feelings, say no to a request, without feeling guilty, be treated with respect and dignity, make mistakes, ask and give when you decide, establish your priorities and your own decisions, feel good, succeed, have privacy, reciprocate, demand the agreed quality and be happy (Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs. Spain, 2004).

There are several assertive techniques. According to the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs of Spain and the Generalitat, they mention, among others, the following techniques: scratched record (insist on our assertive rights), fog bank (identify at least one point of agreement with our interlocutor), viable commitment (agreements that agree to the parties without implying waiving our assertive rights), negative acceptance (accepting criticism at first without allowing our rights to be violated), positive acceptance (express recognition of the qualities of the other), questioning or assertive question (to identify the interlocutor's intention or motives).

Elements to develop a didactic strategy based on assertiveness for conflict management

It is clear that assertiveness is the key tool for conflict management in the classroom. However, acquiring the ability to be assertive does not occur with the simple explanation of the term, because it is not only a conceptual aspect, but procedural and attitudinal.

That is why it is necessary to systematically implement a set of teaching-learning activities, that is, a didactic strategy, so that this behavior becomes a fundamental part of the students' training. It is not the purpose of this work to develop the didactic strategy for conflict management, but to consider the elements that can serve as a framework for the design of didactic strategies whose purpose is to promote assertive behavior, that is, within communication, structure and personal variables.

In terms of communication, there are two aspects that can be considered in the design of a didactic strategy. According to Lewis Coser, the presence of a conflict between groups generates a series of benefits within them, such as the sense of belonging and social cohesion from the development of social skills. If this functionality of the conflict is transferred to a learning scenario, that allows, for example, to form teams with some pressure to compete with others, but taking care not to encourage aggressive attitudes (such as winning at the cost of humiliating the other team), or passive (letting themselves win), but, on the contrary, to develop the ability to generate agreements of coexistence between the parties. Conflict arises when the communication process is affected by physiological, semantic or cultural barriers. In this sense, different evaluation instruments can be designed for different activities that allow the recognition of barriers, as well as the strategies implemented for their management, in such a way as to guarantee adequate communication.

In terms of structure, the didactic strategy would consist of the members of each team learning to write objectives and goals, establish rules or policies for team performance and define clear criteria for the assignment of functions and tasks. This element would seek to promote assertive behavior through the development of negotiation and leadership skills.

As for personal variables, it would seek to promote activities that allow the recognition of one's own value systems, the ability to communicate them, as well as respect for the hierarchy of values of others. Some activities that may include personal variables are the discussion or debate board.

Being assertive is not achieved as if it were a cooking recipe that is followed to the letter, you must constantly practice the different techniques that exist to identify which is the most appropriate according to the situation.

Being assertive should be seen as a virtue and everyone who wants to be virtuous in something must practice it constantly and surpass himself all the time. You must be aware that the work of being assertive is in each person, but the teacher is the one who must set the example and promote this behavior in the classroom, so that the students identify that under respect and empathy to the other can overcome conflicts, here would apply the phrase *"the word convinces, but the example drags."*

Discussion

According to the analysis that was carried out, assertiveness may seem the panacea for conflict management, but it must be corroborated that teachers and students clearly identify what having an assertive behavior refers to because there are very thin or unclear lines in passive or aggressive behaviors that students or teachers will think are in the right.

The implementation of assertiveness as an element for the management of conflicts in the classroom, will not be an easy task, since it must be accompanied by previous strategies to implement it, such as sensitization to the teacher to identify the importance of doing it, training to know, do and be of this competence, in addition to considering other elements to make it really effective, As is the strengthening of emotional intelligence, effective communication, organization-structure of class and projects, in addition to accompanying the teachers in this process so that they in turn can guide the students.

According to the results, it will also be of great importance to carry out actions so that students change their perception regarding the conflict since they mostly avoid it because they relate it to something negative, in this sense it would be interesting to carry out an analysis through interviews where the answers of the students in this regard are addressed in greater depth.

The teachers' opinion would also be of great help to identify if it agrees that assertiveness is an indispensable element to develop supporting communication and organization strategies in their daily activities and projects to be developed with the students, and thus, be able to minimize or manage the conflict that may arise.

Conclusions

Acquiring assertive behavior and, consequently, the ability to prevent and properly manage conflicts requires a systematized practice, that is, as part of a didactic strategy. The main advantage of these elements is their flexibility to adapt to any subject, since it is not about including the issue of assertiveness as such, but about generating didactic activities that have assertiveness as a tool that promotes the generation of agreements and the ability to resolve conflicts.

At all times of life people will face conflict, it is inevitable, the interesting thing about it is to discover how to solve it or take advantage of it, not to identify it as something negative, but as a learning opportunity. Identifying what is triggering the conflict, communication, structure, personal variables or a combination of them, will greatly help to develop viable and effective strategies for its solution. Currently we are going through an atypical situation such as a pandemic, which detonated conflicts in different areas of our lives, and education was no exception, so it is important to identify strategies that help overcome conflicts that arise in the classroom: virtual or face-to-face, and according to the analysis carried out and the survey applied to the students at Universidad Tecnológica de León, in Guanajuato, Mexico, assertiveness is identified as the most viable and applicable element in any conflict situation in developing strategies.

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