

Tension in Class

Context:

This school district program is experiencing an accelerating increase in youth enrollment, especially 16-18 year olds. Several teachers feel unprepared for the different needs and behaviors that some of the youth bring, and the program has been asking for professional development related to this widespread trend.

In Marina's GED class, which has a range of students, from ungraduated youth to retirees, the issues came to a head one day when she asked one of the older students to bring a young student, who had been late, up to speed on a computer application they were learning and practicing that day. The older student became angry and said, "These kids don't do their homework and come in late, and then expect the rest of us to accommodate them. Let him figure it out!" Marina was taken aback and unsure of what to do. She saw some of the other older adults nodding, some of the young adults frowning, and other students looking bewildered. After an awkward silence, another student offered to work with the latecomer, but Marina felt that she also needed to address this tension in the class. To give herself time to think, she just said something quickly about the group needing to make the class work well for everyone, and that they would address this tomorrow.

Marina knew that the quickest solution to the problem would be to set down some rules regarding tardiness, but she felt that there was an opportunity here to build community in the classroom, to encourage students to take responsibility for their learning, and to practice the interpersonal skills that would help everyone in their daily lives. The next day, she came to class with a plan to address three objectives:

1. to address the us/them dynamic in the class by giving people a chance to hear a range of individual experiences and opinions,
2. to build conflict resolutions skills, and
3. to find creative solutions to the specific problem.

Learning Activities:

Marina opened the hour by reminding them of the tensions in the last class. She explained that she wanted the class to work well for everyone and suggested that they figure out ways to do that together as they worked on their writing for the GED. She asked them to practice their free-writing by writing for 15 minutes about the challenges of getting to class each day. "What do you need to do to get here each day? What kinds of things get in the way?" Then she partnered them in cross-age pairs to talk about what they'd written.

After they regrouped, Marina encouraged volunteers to say something that they had learned about the other person's life or that helped them understand the other person. Many students spoke about how much more difficult people's lives were than they had thought. The activity seemed to soften the tension in the group, so Marina felt comfortable continuing. She posted the standard "Resolve Conflict and Negotiate" on the wall and explained that they were going to test it out, step by step, by discussing the issue that arose in the last class. Along the way, they would interpret what the standard meant to them.

Resolve Conflict and Negotiate	How the Standard was Addressed: A Summary of the Class Discussion
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Acknowledge that there is a conflict.	The group agreed that there was a conflict but didn't feel that the whole class was involved. They agreed, though, to talk it through.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Identify areas of agreement and disagreement.	As they tried to answer the question "What is the conflict?" they found that they defined the issue differently. They could agree on the "facts" (that some students are late, that this can be disruptive, etc.) but they didn't agree on the "motives" (whether latecomers were inconsiderate or had legitimate conflicts,

	<p>etc.). They could agree, also, on a goal: “a class where people don’t interfere with each others’ learning.” Marina was hoping for a more positive statement, but she settled for this.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Generate options for resolving conflict that have a “win/win” potential. 	<p>Before jumping into a brainstorm about solutions, Marina had them discuss, in small groups, the meaning of “win/win” and why it mattered. Why not just set down a bunch of rules and force people to abide by them? This was probably the most valuable part of the lesson, as it helped the students articulate their own view of how differences can be truly resolved rather than squashed, and engaged them in taking ownership of what had initially been Marina's goal. Everyone “winning” meant that everyone’s needs would need to be addressed.</p> <p>The younger students named two common barriers that made it hard for some of them to get to class on time:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - work schedules that didn’t fit perfectly with class times - unreliable transportation <p>Their need was to resolve (or live with) these barriers. They also wanted the others to “give them more credit” for having good reasons when they were late or didn’t do their homework.</p> <p>The older students named their needs this way:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - we need to not be interrupted so we can stay focused and remember what we’re doing - we want there to be order and respect in the class (so we can feel that this is a place of learning)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Engage parties in trying to reach agreement on a course of action that can satisfy the needs and interests of all. 	<p>Just the opportunity to have their needs heard had melted away a lot of the tension in class, but they proceeded with the process.</p> <p>The younger students didn’t appreciate the advice given to them about advocating with their bosses for better schedules, but they were comfortable with the suggestion that they call ahead if they were to be late (a forgotten program rule). They also liked Marina’s idea of developing a voluntary buddy system so that latecomers could go directly to their buddies rather than disrupting the class looking for help. If the buddies were busy, latecomers could read until the teacher was available to help them. The older student agreed to try to be more patient when “life happens.”</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evaluate results of efforts and revise approach as necessary. 	<p>How would they evaluate this new agreement? They would check in on a monthly basis to make sure that everyone still felt that they were “winning.”</p>

Marina knew that there was more work to do in building understanding among the students. She knew that some of the older students had strong judgmental feelings about youth who don’t stay in school. And some of the younger students lacked the maturity to see beyond their own needs. For now, this felt like progress.

The next day, Marina had them practice their GED essay-writing by writing about “why or why not this discussion was a good use of our class time.” In this way, she could assess the value of the lesson and also weave it back to the work on writing that they had been doing before. No one had trouble getting started.