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Journal of Film and Video, Volume 61, Number 1, Spring 2009, pp.
18-30 (Article)

Published by University of Illinois Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/jfv.0.0020>



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CARROLL HODGE

SCENARIO: THREE STUDENT CREWS SPEND a weekend creating short group projects. They have all received the same technical training and are using the same type of equipment. There is a balance of previous experience, strengths, and liabilities in each crew. Crew A returns glowing with pride in their production, feeling connected to each other and proud of the strong footage they produced. Members of Crew B no longer speak to each other; their footage is incoherent and far from their initial intentions. Crew C is in neutral—they experienced a safe and cautious shoot but felt no excitement about their project and their mediocre footage.

If so many factors were relatively equal going into the shoot, why such a disparity in the outcomes? One factor became painfully clear to the instructor: each crew had a markedly different level of collaboration and degree of conflict. In their written reflections at the end of the project, many of these students considered effective collaborations to be due to the luck of the draw and the makeup of the crew; conflict was largely attributed to a few difficult personalities. They had little sense of what they could do another time to either reproduce success-

ful interactions or negotiate disastrous ones. They had come to believe that conflict was to be avoided at all costs and that real cooperation and effective communication required more time and effort than they could afford to invest in a film. Ultimately, many believed that being the director was the only way to have *real* creative impact. The class discussions and critiques concentrated on logistical and technical problems. Even when asked to share their most valuable learning points, no one addressed their difficulties with collaboration or conflict. The very factors that had the most impact on the success and failure of their projects were not a conscious or articulated element of their filmmaking process.

Imagine, instead, collaboration presented as a set of specific skills that could be developed and insights that could be nurtured in all filmmakers, and imagine conflict analyzed as a complex web of energy—potentially creative if shorn of its destructive components. What if skilled collaboration and conflict negotiation were essential elements of our production curriculum equal in value to technical skills and aesthetic talent? What if the philosophical beliefs about the value of collaboration in our film program descriptions and class syllabi were translated into a more conscious, concrete set of skills woven into our technical training, our assignments, and our critiques of student work? What if, as teachers, we shared more of our professional experiences and struggles with artistic collaboration, our successes and failures with conflict negotiation, and our result-

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ing hard-won insights? Our students could be motivated to explore the deeper aspects of this mysterious thing called collaboration and the multiple ways that even the most disastrous conflicts can be negotiated.

Beyond the practical use of skilled collaboration to avoid disasters, there is much more: the enhancement of a filmmaker's ability to work well with a rich variety of personalities to consider a wider set of artistic possibilities, resulting in the realization of a more compelling artistic vision. Film editor and sound designer Walter Murch says it well: "Each of those moments of collaboration, each contribution by someone other than the director, adds a slightly different perspective to the work, some chisel mark slightly at an angle to the central vision. And each of these moments, these facets, has the potential to make the work 'sparkle' in a creative sense, and make it accessible to a greater variety of people over a longer period of time" (Ondaatje 242).

Realities of Student Filmmaking

Collaboration in student filmmaking is, of course, significantly different from collaboration in industry filmmaking. Student filmmakers must work with some critically important differences that add to the complexity of collaborating. They are being graded individually for their group efforts, even though they have little control or authority over their crewmates, and everyone is *learning* their craft as they perform it. As they struggle to find, use, and protect their own singular and unique voice, they are working in groups to create collective projects. Many of them come to a film program focused on the role of a director as the controlling creative voice and struggle to find ways to have creative influence in any other crew position. As inexperienced young adults, they are too often expected to master collaboration on their own, as if it were an innate skill, not a learned one. Our students need access to the best creative collaboration experiences we can design for them at the beginning of and throughout their program, not at the end.

Seasoned professionals have been articulate in describing their experiences in mastering collaboration and negotiating conflict, and their experiences are often a good place to start with students. Television producer John Wells (*ER* [1994–], *West Wing* [1999–2006]) values having a degree of creative tension in his collaborations and builds it into discussions with his writing staff where "everybody's ax gets goaded. But it leads to a really open conversation, where we're honest about each other's work" (Dannenbaum, Hodge, and Mayer 105). Director Guillermo del Toro (*El Laberinto del fauno* [*Pan's Labyrinth*], 2006) argues fiercely in his collaborations with fellow directors Alfonso Cuarón and Alejandro González Inárritu, claiming, "We are, always, sincerely brutal about each other's work . . ." (Hirschberg). Knowing when to curb discord on a set and when to let it serve the purposes of the film is an essential skill for director and production designer Catherine Hardwicke (Hardwicke, notes). She believes that an in-depth knowledge of human behavior is essential for her own survival as a director. If she can recognize some of the sources for a crewmember's negative behavior, she believes she will have more options in dealing with that individual. Hardwicke advocates this kind of awareness for every director and crewmember.

Defining Collaboration and Conflict

Artistic collaboration is an intricate dance that cannot be forced, defined precisely, or pinned down entirely. It can be articulated, and like any enduring relationship, collaboration needs to be nurtured with skill and insight. Truly creative collaborations—a production designer whose ripple of insight makes a cinematographer's work "sparkle," a unique solution suggested by the boom operator, a collision of opposing ideas between the writer and director that transitions into an even better idea—are worth more than gold to filmmakers. As Murch said, each creative perspective enables a film to reach farther and last longer. And it is skilled collaboration that enables technical expertise

and artistic talent to be fully realized. Writer and director Kimberly Peirce (*Boys Don't Cry* [1999], *Stop-Loss* [2008]) believes that choosing the right people to collaborate with is essential: "You might as well be on a lifeboat, because if that person is not seeing what you are seeing, you're dead, you know? You are relying on them, no matter how domineering you may be. They bring you back stuff they can do that you can't do" (Dannenbaum et al. 102).

Robert Hargrove in *Mastering the Art of Creative Collaboration* states that "people are inspired to collaborate when they imagine a goal or complex problem that is deeply meaningful to them and they recognize that they can't accomplish it alone" (35). He adds that along with an increase in creativity, effective collaborations have the benefits of additional strength and energy. "A flock of birds flying together in a V formation has the lifting power to carry twice the distance of a single bird flying alone" (3).

Creative, collaborative relationships will inevitably involve some degree of conflict because there is passion and investment on all sides. In the midst of the conflict, it can be useful to determine if it is the useful, creative type of conflict or the destructive, noncreative type. If it is conflict that can enhance and enrich the craft and the artistic choices being made, then it is worth spending some time "leaning into" the controversy and listening deeply to opposing views. If the conflict seems primarily a clash of egos and a struggle for power, then it probably needs to be addressed efficiently and contained quickly. Many situations will of course involve both types, and the key becomes finding the best solution to both—one that refocuses a crew on what is best for the film while acknowledging that there are personal, individual needs that cannot be ignored.

Scenario: A student project is running out of funds, and the producer has dipped into her own pocket for the fourth time and gone out to get lunch for the cast and crew. The loss of a location that morning has sent the cinematographer and director scrambling to reframe their shots for the next scene in

the new location. When the producer, an experienced student director in her own right, sees the new shot list, she goes ballistic with the director and the director of photography (DP). In a loud voice, she hurls a list of better ways to cover the next scene than their plan presents. The director ignores her and makes a call on his cell phone. The DP and crew shut down, and all work stops.

There are both creative and destructive types of conflict happening here. Which should be dealt with first? In some cases it will be impossible to deal cleanly with the practical and artistic needs of the film before the emotional/ego needs of the individuals are addressed. In other cases, solving a serious but straightforward problem such as lack of time with a more creative camera position can break the emotional logjam, allow a crew to refocus on the work, and let the personal issues wait until later to be solved. In this scenario, the assistant director may suggest the crew eat lunch while the producer and director work through their differences, creating the space for the greater tension to be unlocked. But the producer may keep yelling because she does not feel heard, and the director may disappear literally or figuratively because he hates conflict. It could be the DP who finds a solution by setting up the camera in one of the positions the producer had suggested, recognizing a good idea in spite of the angry way it was delivered and calling the director and producer over to check it out. Or it may be the director who acknowledges that he needs the most creative solutions right now from any quarter and proposes that he and the producer postpone their personal conflicts until after they have finished the day's work. Any crew person who has gained the skills and the confidence to negotiate conflict and nurture collaboration can facilitate this kind of mediation, regardless of his or her role.

Conflict is a vast, complex, and fluctuating issue in many professional fields such as law, business, medicine, and the arts. It is beyond the scope of this article to explore it beyond reviewing a small number of references in the

rapidly growing field of research into conflict negotiation and encouraging faculty to explore these practical and available tools more fully.

Resources for Creative Negotiation and Conflict Resolution

A number of authors have written about collaboration and conflict in ways that are especially useful and translatable to filmmaking. Roger Fisher, William Ury, and Bruce Patton collaborated on the *Getting to Yes* books, which are based on their extensive research and practice with the Harvard Negotiation Project. In essence, the authors shift the emphasis from getting even to more effectively getting what you want, as well as enabling the other person to get some of what he or she wants.

Hargrove's *Mastering the Art of Creative Collaboration* offers case studies of skillful collaboration, drawn from business and global politics, which offer down to earth and readable anecdotes that can be relevant to student collaborations. The author talks about the value of intentional collaboration, not waiting for it to happen or not happen.

Roger Fisher and Daniel Shapiro's book *Beyond Reason: Using Emotions as You Negotiate* is especially relevant to unlocking conflict. The authors describe useful behaviors such as reflecting back what you hear with active listening, even listening for the "music" of a person's speech. You can detect clues to what a person is really feeling by listening to which word the person emphasizes in a phrase. If he or she says, "I like this proposal," it may translate as "The other decision makers don't like this proposal, but I do." If, on the other hand they say, "I like *this* proposal," they probably mean "I like this proposal but not the other proposals" (28–29).

Fisher and Shapiro have identified several core concerns that are usually present in crucial interactions:

- *Appreciation and status*—"Am I valued on this crew?"

- *Affiliation*—"Am I being treated as a colleague or as an adversary?"
- *Autonomy*—"Am I being kept from doing my job?"
- *Role*—"What is my role? Is it too limited? Too broad? Do others see my role in the same way I do?" (14+)

If these core concerns are presented early in a production class, and then reinforced as the process heats up in preproduction planning, students may be able to recall them even in the midst of the stress of shooting. And these four concerns offer an excellent outline for a crew's later reflection on their collaborative interactions.

David D. Burns's list of listening skills in *The Feeling Good Handbook* is short and easy to apply in unlocking conflict:

- *Disarming*—finding truth in what the other person is saying
- *Empathy*—seeing the other person's view of the world
- *Inquiry*—finding out more about what the other person means
- *Stroking*—sending a respectful message to an opponent.

He illustrates two self-expression skills that are especially effective in lessening tension: "I feel . . ." statements rather than "You make me . . ." accusations (379). His chapter "Five Secrets of Intimate Communication" offers many concrete examples that illustrate how these five responses can be used to deal with difficult, critical, and noncommunicative people. The following chapter, "How to Deal with Difficult People," tackles situations that are even more demanding (420+).

Tricia S. Jones and Ross Brinkert's *Conflict Coaching: Conflict Management Strategies and Skills for the Individual* offers several effective tools for getting a quick sense of the complexity and scope of conflict interactions. An early chapter titled "Discovering the Story" describes using the narrative structure to first understand

a conflict from one participant's perspective and to later encourage participants to tell the same story from another person's point of view (45+). Their conflict styles framework places five conflict styles (competing, avoiding, compromising, accommodating, and collaborating) on a map along axes of concern for self and concern for other, with collaboration representing the highest concern for both self and others and requiring a "high level of trust between parties" (190–95). Another chapter discusses individual conflict styles and the importance of participants identifying their own style and developing an awareness of their colleagues' styles of approach to conflict, cultural backgrounds, and so on (196–201).

Most of the books summarized here can be scanned quickly for relevant information. They can be recommended to students who may be motivated to read about collaboration as they emerge from a difficult collaborative experience or are about to enter the next one. A reading list on communication skills also signals to students that there are accessible tools for effective collaboration and that these skills are valuable for filmmakers to have.

Teaching Collaboration Skills

Following are a number of teaching concepts and exercises related to collaboration and conflict negotiation that are geared to coincide with existing courses and production schedules so that students can practice collaboration skills at the same time they are learning technical information and making films. Specific communication concepts mentioned previously in the review of books are left to the individual teacher to adapt as needed to their own courses. Many of these tools not only nurture the creative process in individual students but can also help develop an accepting and open environment for an entire production team or class.

Trust Your Own Experience

Teaching collaboration and conflict negotiation skills requires drawing upon many of the same life experiences and professional work that we

already use in teaching production. Our first-hand collaborative experiences, both good and bad, on film crews and in writing and producing projects, have given us insights that can be useful to our students. We have also observed and, at times, had to intervene in our students' conflicts. We have collaborated with teaching peers, built and survived friendships, and learned from long-term relationships. We have also developed our own policies and boundaries in determining what aspects of a student's personal life can be appropriately discussed as part of their academic and creative experience. Having a clearly established and well-communicated set of boundaries in a classroom is an essential ingredient to building and nurturing a safe-to-risk creative and collaborative learning environment. It is also one of the models students will use, consciously or unconsciously, in establishing their own creative teams.

Students' Previous Experience

Our students have had multiple experiences in family and group living and in cooperative and conflict situations before they enter our film programs. They will play out the legacies of many of these experiences as they enter into artistic collaborations.

Student Entry Questionnaire

As students enter a production class, they are often asked to describe their previous filmmaking experience and level of technical skill. This is also an excellent opportunity to ask them to reflect on their previous experiences in collaboration (both positive and negative) and to identify characteristics of their style of working in groups and dealing with conflict. This is not only helpful in getting to know students as individuals but also an early signal to the class that collaboration and conflict negotiation are valued elements in developing their filmmaking expertise. Ironically, many students who already have strong communication and mediation skills may not choose to use them in the heat of film production if they are not certain that these skills are valued by their peers or by the film program.

Nurturing Collaboration in Film Students

Creating remarkable, memorable films requires a complex form of artistic collaboration—a team of filmmakers with multiple craft perspectives and diverse personalities must find and follow the same story, theme, and vision for a film on an arduous schedule. Student filmmakers have additional challenges, such as attempting collaboration while *learning* their craft and discovering their own artistic instincts. The heavy demands and deadlines of a filmmaking program can influence some students to work alone or in limited collaboration, choosing ideas and personalities they are already familiar with, avoiding a messier, riskier exchange of ideas. Both students and teachers may resist trying to make time in a crowded schedule for developing collaboration and conflict negotiation skills when there is so much else to cover.

The case can be made, however, that a student crew cannot afford the many lost hours that result from a collective meltdown, when they cannot get past blaming others to a solution and are unable to repair and restore ragged crew relationships. It is an expensive loss of creativity and productivity that could be avoided if a film crew has the skills to collaborate effectively, mediate destructive conflict, and protect opportunities for creative, *constructive* conflict.

Egalitarian/Authoritarian Continuum

There is a natural if unstated progression in many classes from open-ended, egalitarian brainstorming of ideas to the hierarchical, role-specific structure of actual production. Students who flourished in the looser atmosphere of the earlier activities may chafe at the gradual narrowing of their roles; those who felt uncomfortable or impatient with the free-form nature of brainstorming and team building may appreciate the shift to more tightly defined roles and structures. In either case, it is important to graph this shift from an open-ended discussion of ideas where everyone contributes on an equal level, a sort of “spider’s web” structure where information flows to and from the center (directors and producers), to a conventional

hierarchy of power and responsibility where crew members communicate with the top using formal channels at defined times. Students can learn how to work well in both modes and find ways to keep the collective energy and vision of the brainstorming period alive as they and their crew shift to the efficiency and focus of the hierarchical mode. Their ability to find ways to keep their own energy and creativity alive even in limited production roles will serve them well as they work in the wider film industry.

Crewmembers in positions such as sound recording and boom operating often experience the greatest frustration on a set where most of the energy seems to be directed toward capturing the visual image. They can also be among the most skilled collaborators, having learned how to contribute their own creative ideas and solutions to problems in ways that do not threaten a colleague’s authority and allow their ideas to become everyone’s ideas.

Ultimately, every student filmmaker must adjust to a professional power structure for the good of the film and find ways to stay involved and creative within their role. Everyone does not have an equal say in filmmaking, but there are those critical moments where leadership on the set shifts to those with the expertise needed in that moment. It may be the assistant director who comes up with the solution; it may be the second assistant cameraperson. Collaboration thrives when the creative “leadership” is granted to whoever in the moment has the best idea or solution to a difficulty rather than who is in the most powerful role.

Deep and Effective Listening

Playwright and actor (*West Wing*) Anna Deavere Smith creates plays such as *Twilight Los Angeles* with a multitude of diverse characters, basing them on her intense listening to real people in research interviews. She says, “Listening is not just hearing what someone tells you word for word. You have to listen with a heart . . . it is very hard work . . . the process of hearing everyone requires that I empty out myself. While I’m listening, my own judgments and prejudices

certainly come up. But I won't get anything unless I get those things out of the way." Smith was invited to develop students' communication skills at NYU's Tisch School of the Arts (Arenson 34–35). In the following exercises there are opportunities for instructors to help students improve their listening skills by suspending their immediate judgments until they have fully understood and explored a new idea. This suspension is as essential for the student writer/director who has come up with the fledgling idea or script as it is for the students who are responding to the idea given that listening to feedback also requires a suspension of judgment in order to really take in a useful critique.

Script Feedback Sessions

During preproduction, ask students to pair up with a colleague and, using their own scripts as the basis for discussion, ask their colleague to respond with aesthetic, intellectual, and emotional reactions to the work. The students then practice summarizing what they heard and checking it out with their partner. This is actually very hard work and not easy to do for more than a short period. It does reveal how layered our communication is, how easy it is to misunderstand, and how often we stop listening because we are thinking about what we are about to say next. These interviews can also be videotaped so that students can analyze their own listening and interviewing skills.

Nurturing a Filmmaker's Original Voice

There is a direct relationship between discovering and strengthening one's own voice and then bringing that voice to the table in collaboration with other voices. Some film programs have students begin by creating their own films and doing most of the technical work themselves. Others have students rotate through specific craft roles on each other's projects. A third structure is to provide students with both experiences right from the start. Each structure has its advantages and drawbacks for enabling a student's original voice to develop at the same time and pace as their ability to collaborate.

If student directors are faced with too much feedback on their ideas too early in their development of their own artistic instincts, then collaboration will be difficult and conflict inevitable. New directors often have a lack of experience in listening to their own instincts and in turn have little confidence in the instincts and experience of their crewmembers who are trying to offer them ideas and feedback. Their lack of trust in themselves and in their crew can then translate into directors thinking they have to know everything and control everything, rather than listening to or collaborating well with their crewmembers, who can offer creative ideas from their own specific craft. Nurturing students' confidence in their own cinematic instincts and their ability to take risks goes hand in hand with encouraging their collaboration abilities such as trust and openness. Once a new director or producer believes his or her crewmembers are truly collaborating and focused on what is best for the film, that individual is able to provide leadership and vision rather than attempting tight control. Good crew morale requires respect from their leaders and having serious ideas seriously considered. No crew expects a director to accept or use every idea.

Far from the Familiar

Composer James Newton Howard described working with director Scott Hicks on *Snow Falling on Cedars* (1999) as one of the hardest collaborations of his life and one that "changed the way I work." Howard initially found the director's selections of types of music for the film to be "weird, so far out, [and] so wrong for the sensibility of the film" that he despaired of being able to bridge the gap between his own ideas and those of the director. But he listened fully and suspended his judgment until he gradually *heard* the director's instincts, icy and cold, and realized he could use them in his composing. This deepened his own compositions and resulted in what he considers some of the best work he has ever done (Dannenberg et al. 107).

James Newton Howard's experience of stretching himself in order to collaborate is a

good starting point for motivating students to consider embracing rather than resisting major differences of style, taste, and experience in their collaborations. They may be comfortable considering wild ideas in other students' projects but resist any radical suggestions made for their own films.

Ask students to choose a photo, a piece of music, or an existing character behavior for an upcoming script or film of theirs that is purposefully very far from their own taste, experience, and comfort zone. The assignment is to spend some time taking in the artistic element without judgment, looking for a "way in" to understand it or to gain a greater clarity about his or her own sensibilities. Students can describe and reflect on their experience in a few written paragraphs or aloud with their production team. Hopefully this activity links to more effective collaboration: the creative stimulation that is triggered by a completely new experience, a deeper awareness of one's own biases, practice colliding with new ideas without rejecting them too quickly, responding to new ideas with "maybe" instead of "no."

Bullpen Collaborations

The idea-development phase of a project is well suited to free-form "bullpen" collaborations, where students in a small group pitch ideas for short scripts to each other, giving and receiving feedback. The goal is to quickly help develop and enrich every filmmaker's idea, find the useful questions to ask but not yet subjecting the idea or script to a detailed critique. Students receive feedback from peers with differing perspectives and life experiences. Ideas are not generated by a specific craft role; anyone can make suggestions about casting, sound, lighting, production design, and so on. The structure is egalitarian; good ideas can come from many directions.

This activity involves students with each other's ideas at an early stage and helps establish openness to collaboration before competition sets in. Students are encouraged to listen carefully to an idea before jumping in with suggestions, to ask clarifying questions, to rec-

ognize those questions that are actually veiled suggestions, and to build on the presenter's original idea rather than going off on an entirely new one. This skill of "brainstorming," like improvisation, depends on a group's ability to use open, accepting phrases such as "And also . . ." or "What about . . .?" rather than responses such as "That'll never work . . ." or "No way!"

When a class or a crew experiences the small thrill that comes with one idea sparking an even better idea, or when a suggestion not only solves a specific problem but provides a more unique perspective, they realize that this process makes everyone involved a better filmmaker. And in the long run, students learn whom they would like to collaborate with in the future, that different people are clever or insightful in different ways and at different times, and that collectively we are all smarter than any one of us alone. It is also useful to see creative ideas themselves as more of the focus than who gets the credit and to see that the best and most complete ideas are often the culmination of a trail of many raw ideas.

Television producer John Wells believes in brainstorming with his entire staff and crew to keep an ongoing series from going stale, and he encourages a period of high energy and wild ideas before reining them in. Wells believes in encouraging "other voices to really enter [into the creative process]" and that the series pilot "is like you've written the bass line for a melody in a jazz combo, and then everybody else gets to play off that melody. You want to be careful that it doesn't go completely off, but you also want to make sure that the ability of other artists to improvise and to contribute isn't stymied by your own imaginings of exactly what it should be" (Dannenbaum et al. 123).

Inviting a small panel of professional filmmakers or recent film graduates to your production class can offer students a concrete opportunity to witness collaboration in action. For instance, with a new film in preproduction, an articulate production designer, an experienced cinematographer, and a creative assistant director or producer can discuss their preparations with each other and demonstrate the rich,

exhilarating, and at times frustrating exchanges they have as they search for the best ways to realize the director's vision for the film. The collaborators will express ideas from the perspective of their own crafts and acknowledge their working knowledge of each other's craft as well as of the specific limitations they must all work within (budget, time, location, etc.). They can also describe some of the reasons collaborations fall apart, the negative consequences for the film and the crew, and some of the ways they have previously repaired or restored good working relationships during a production.

Writing Multiple Points of View

In the early stages of developing a script or scene, ask students to explore another character's point of view by rewriting a scene or writing a new scene. As they see the story freshly and from multiple points of view, ask them what new information has emerged that is useful for deepening or clarifying their stories. This exercise, developed by Jeff Rush at Temple University, is invaluable in increasing students' ability to create three-dimensional characters, empathize with non-heroic behavior, and ultimately, cast and direct believable characters. It can also extend and enrich a director's pre-visualization work. Students who role-play these new perspectives can also gain a great deal of layered understanding in the varieties of personalities and range of responses their peers have in their real-life behavior.

Gender, Race, and Class

We all need to develop a greater understanding of the "hidden" conflicts that can influence interactions and to look for ways to bring them to the surface. Differences in areas of personal outlook, family history, cultural worldviews, and economic pressures need to surface not only for the sake of negotiating conflict more effectively but also for the profound contribution diverse perceptions can bring to collaboration. It is beyond the scope of this article to cover issues of gender, race, and class as they affect collaborations and conflict negotiations except to say that these are very real elements

that have enormous influence and yet so often go unrecognized. The earlier exercise of "Writing Multiple Points of View" and the following "Conflict Scene Work" both provide openings for instructors to introduce issues of diversity into conversations about collaboration and conflict.

Conflict Scene Work

Breaking down and analyzing existing scenes with specific types of conflict is an opportunity for instructors to provide students with practice in experiencing, negotiating, and discussing conflict. In the second half of the film *Good Will Hunting* (1997),¹ two college students confront each other at a crucial stage in their relationship. Skylar, the female character, can be played as direct, open, or demanding. Will, the boyfriend, can be pessimistic, accusatory, or diverting. Having different pairs of students study the choices each character makes and then rehearse and perform these roles for the class can trigger in-depth conversations—not only about the scene itself but also about the ways different people approach and avoid conflict. Students can observe characters staying with and even leaning into useful conflict that is getting to the "truth," characters inflicting insults to divert the conversation, or characters refusing to be diverted and staying with the big questions.

The *Good Will Hunting* scene between Skylar and Will does not resolve neatly, but it opens up the core needs and fears of the characters that are driving the story. The process of breaking down a script or scene into its dramatic elements can heighten a student's awareness of the complex range of human behavior and underline the variety of ways people communicate when they are in conflict (direct, indirect, etc.). Students can learn a great deal about human behavior in their writing, acting, and directing classes—the subtle nuances of behavior that reveal complex character traits, the active conflict that is expressive of a character's needs and wants or that can disguise a character's real intentions. This knowledge is essential in helping students make more compelling and

authentic films. Students who are willing to deepen their understanding of the dynamics of conflict will be more equipped to step through some of the negative energy of personality conflicts on a set, more able to discern the core needs of a crew member.

Director's Script Breakdown

Working with and identifying the beats of dramatic conflict can enhance a student's own writing and directing of scenes with conflict. Students can also assume the roles and play out the scene, trying it several times, making different choices each time about the specific underlying needs that drive behavior. Instructors can make use of the open-ended nature of this activity, reminding students that the search is not for one right answer, but the final choice that makes sense to the director and actors. While students are building their own understanding of the complexity of emotions and of human beings in moments of conflict, they are taking risks with each other that can serve them well in later interactions.

Actors and directors not only collaborate in this kind of emotional scene work but also can end up in real conflict with each other. Actor Kathy Baker found herself in conflict with director David E. Kelley over her role as an angry mother who hits her son in an episode of the television series *Picket Fences*. She believed her character would never do that and argued with Kelley about it. He explained that the episode was about people who *do not* (usually) hit their kids and that it was a stronger story because her character was the type of mother who believed she would never do that—and then did. Once Baker realized the usefulness of Kelley's approach, and that he trusted her ability to create this character, she was again able to collaborate. She also recognized that her resistance was related to her own exhaustion and her fear of going to such an uncomfortable place (Dannenbaum et al. 107).

Role-Playing Real-Life Conflict Scenarios

Several production classes at the University of Southern California experimented with stu-

dents role-playing typical conflict situations as a way to teach production safety, filmmaking ethics, and communication skills. Students drew cards out of a hat that had brief descriptions of specific, problematic production situations and then played out the scenario with a partner. In the discussions that followed, it was possible to address difficult issues with both humor and directness. The scenarios in this same activity could be constructed to allow students to identify which type of arguments are worth having for the benefit of the film (constructive conflict) and which fights are personality- or power-based (destructive conflict). Because many conflicts in filmmaking are a combination of both, scenarios could be presented that initially seem to be just a crew member's own power trip or bad behavior but that, when explored, reveal his or her real concern for the betterment of the film. Students themselves would be great authors of these scenarios.

Creative Conflict Negotiation

Planning meetings for a production are excellent opportunities for student filmmakers to practice their conflict negotiation skills. It is early enough in the process that the stakes are not as high as they will be once the shooting starts. Bad decisions can still be reversed and good ones refined. Successfully negotiating specific conflicts (starting with the most urgent or the smallest) is empowering to a crew and gives them confidence that when later conflicts arise during production or postproduction, when the pressures are greater, they will be able to successfully navigate them.

Specific types of meetings offer different collaboration opportunities to various parts of the crew. The casting and rehearsal process is a critically important juncture for the producer, director, and writer to develop their collaboration and negotiation skills as they collectively respond to auditioning actors. An important shift is taking place here: the writer is watching his or her work become a film, and the director's evolving vision is both relying on and separating from the original material. When

the director of photography and the production designer meet to translate the director's vision into color, light, and locations; when the composer and the director look for a common language in music; and when the editor and the sound designer compare notes, they all have opportunities to unearth and navigate their differences and tone their collaborative muscles.

Producers responsible for managing the production logistics on a project can practice enlightened leadership, collaboration, and skilled communication behavior as they work with crewmembers to creatively negotiate competing needs and priorities—especially in budgeting time and money. All film students, whether their position is above the line or below the line, need experience in anticipating and negotiating practical conflicts—and participating in production planning can provide it. Because students are often funding their own productions and balancing their filmmaking with other classes, the entire crew, not just the producer, has a stake in understanding and discussing the overall parameters of time and money.

Whether a meeting is conducted during or outside class time, two additional elements can be useful—a time limit for arriving at important decisions (reflecting real-world pressures) and a short discussion with all crewmembers asking for and giving feedback before the meeting closes. Asking for feedback not only gives a collaborator permission to offer it but also positions the inquiring student as ready to hear it. Important issues can emerge from these short feedback sessions that may lead to more lengthy conversations between and among students. Feedback sessions are not designed as “feel good” moments (although that may be an outcome); they are designed to bring up issues that must be solved if collaboration is to take place. The information shared may be initially uncomfortable or unexpected, but it is essential to discovering the sources of misunderstandings, establishing clarity about roles, and uncovering assumptions.

Team-Building Strategies

The following ideas are drawn from a range of fields—professional development, business, leadership development—and although they may seem time-consuming or too “far out” to use in a film school setting, they may spark ideas for other strategies that do fit your program.

Sharing a Meal

Once a crew has been formed for an assigned film, ask them to plan a shared evening meal with limited preparation and cleanup time, where each crewmember contributes by doing some part of the meal that they have not done before. After the meal (and cleanup) is over, each team will spend time discussing some of the parallels between meal preparation and the stages of film production. Highlights can be shared with the rest of the class. This is an informal, preproduction event designed to be fun; it parallels similar activities designed by management consultants to build corporate teams.²

Ropes Course

Many students have some previous experience with team-building activities such as the ropes course at leadership conferences and camps. An undergraduate production class at the University of Southern California contacted a campus leadership organization and asked them to set up the ropes course for their newly formed film crews. In a four-hour session on a soundstage, without any hierarchy of roles or official authority, students navigated uneven rope bridges, wooden blocks, and problem-solving tasks. Afterward, the students were asked to share what insights they had gained about their own patterns of behavior as well as general observations about what behaviors worked well for the team and which ones were counterproductive. In the pressured situations of the ropes course, large personalities had become quieter, and leadership had emerged in unlikely moments in students who offered use-

ful solutions to problems. Students had learned new information about their own behavior and that of others on an intuitive level, not an intellectual one.

Some crews used this opportunity as a non-judgmental playing ground for discovery. Other crews could not. The facilitators of this activity believe that the ultimate effectiveness of it depends on faculty who are able to reinforce the insights of this team-building experience with film students as they deal with artistic collaboration throughout the rest of the production cycle and maximize the learning they have gained “on the ropes.”³

Reflections/Evaluations

Many production classes ask students to write brief weekly journals as a way to communicate with their instructors throughout the course. These journals can also be a valuable tool for instructors to receive students’ ongoing reflections on their own collaborations. At the end of student productions, a crew can design their own evaluation questions to measure their collaboration skills. Evaluation questions that ask for responses based on a scale of one through ten offer more useful information than “yes” or “no” answers; good questions can elicit feedback that is oriented toward growth rather than revenge. Crew members can choose to share the results and discuss the findings with each other or read their own evaluations privately. Processing collaborative experiences through personal reflection and group discussions will strengthen and reinforce the learning that has taken place. Instructors can design an evaluation process based on the design of their coursework on collaboration and conflict negotiation. They play a key role in leading discussions and helping students recognize the individual and collective growth of class members in collaboration skills. It is also true that students will learn at their own pace, and it may take several semesters, even years, for some students to gain important insights and expand their collaboration skills.

Conclusion

Making collaboration a *conscious* activity can enable students to more successfully navigate the complex relationships filmmaking entails. As they move through a film program, most students realize they will continue to be confronted with a range of personalities, work habits, communication styles, and creative instincts as they work in the film industry. Earning a reputation as a skilled collaborator and conflict negotiator, it becomes clear, can open as many career doors as talent and technical skill.

Ultimately, students want—and deserve—all the skills a film education can offer them. Their ability to enter into artistic collaboration and conflict negotiations with confidence will inevitably enhance their craft and release their talent and energy in highly creative work.

NOTES

Many of the ideas in this article came about in conversations with my generous and creative colleagues and students at the University of Southern California School of Cinematic Arts.

1. A version of the *Goodwill Hunting* script is available on the Web (http://www.geocities.com/movie_starzz/BenandMatt/goodwillhunting.txt).

2. Stratford University offers culinary workshops where participants are guided through the preparation of meal elements that they have never made, and the entire team is given directions only once, so that each member is responsible for remembering and figuring out the new skills. Time, equipment, and food supplies are limited, so teams must problem-solve and communicate while charged with producing a highly creative presentation of a meal (<http://www.stratford.edu/?page=culinaryworkshops>).

3. There are online sources for companies that offer a variety of team-building activities. See <http://professionalteambuilding.com/ropescourseexperience/index.html>.

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