Differences that Matter: UBC's Conflict Engagement Initiative

Nov 1, 2019

Why We Need This Initiative

We are experiencing a time in history marked by endless opportunities and demands to share physical, digital, intellectual, and psychological spaces with people who are different from us. Our daily lives inevitably bring us into contact with those who hold and exercise worldviews, values, perspectives and needs unlike our own. In this context, the potential for eye-opening and stimulating exchange is vast. So is the potential for conflict.

Universities have always been active sites for the contestation of ideas - today perhaps even more so - as we attempt to create environments that are conducive to learning and growth for a wide range of people. UBC's globalized campuses, situated on unceded Indigenous lands, are impacted by historic and evolving questions around rights, power and belonging. Our pedagogical and administrative landscapes need to adapt to stay relevant. Many members of the UBC community – administrators, faculty, staff, students – are looking to get better equipped to navigate these conflictual spaces in their day-to-day lives. They are the audience for the Conflict Engagement Initiative, which complements – and does not replace - the existing policies and procedures governing how conflict is handled at the university.

The Conflict Engagement Initiative exists to build individual and institutional capacities to engage with conflict as it naturally emerges in the UBC community.

How We Understand Conflict

Conflict is generally defined as a real or perceived incompatibility between the opinions, objectives, interests, or desires of two or more people. In other words, conflict hinges on difference. Sometimes difference is experienced as a threat to something one cares about, and it elicits emotional responses: anxiety, anger, hurt, indignation, irritation, fear – a feeling that things aren't fair.

Conflicts are differences that mobilize our emotional resources: they are differences that matter.

This Initiative takes a broad view of conflict as something that manifests between individuals or groups of people, with possible structural underpinnings. At the university, conflicts range from silent experiences of tension, to vocal confrontations, to formal grievances. Not all conflicts are created equally. They exist, and grow, along a spectrum of intensity. For example, small acts of resentment such as barbed jokes, if not productively engaged, can become the seeds for an escalation pattern that ends with complaints of bullying.

The ways that an organization and its members view conflict changes over time, circumstantially and as the organization's identity changes. This Initiative names our community's current aspirations vis-à-vis working with conflict.
It has the following objectives:

> *We view conflict not as a deficit to be managed and removed, but as a resource to be engaged and harvested.*

- Reframing interpersonal and intergroup tensions as natural, normal and full of potential for deepening conversations and developing people, relationships and ideas. In this view **conflicts are seen as resources** we can harvest, not deficits we need to manage or remove.

- Recognizing the need for a **wider range of tools and approaches** for working with conflicts of various natures and intensities. Building a larger toolkit expands the opportunities for targeted, appropriate responses in each case.

- Acknowledging that we need **widespread skill and acumen** across all populations at our institutions. This calls for building capacity for conflict engagement, targeted to meet the needs of students, staff and faculty, and commensurate with level of responsibility.

- Strengthening institutional systems that are **in service of our collective aspirations**. Conflict engagement policies and procedures should be experienced as transparent and accessible by the entire community, including its most marginalized members.

What is Conflict Engagement

Conflict engagement is defined as any process for facing into and attempting to address conflict, either directly or indirectly, with another party. Conflict engagement is a broad umbrella term that includes conflict resolution, conflict management, conflict intervention, conflict investigation, conflict exploration, and conflict transformation – recognizing that there is a time and place for each.

For a variety of cultural, practical, personal or structural reasons, one or more parties to conflict may decide to walk away from conflict as an alternative to engaging in it. This may well be the most suitable option. But sometimes walking away is *not* an option. Nor should it be the *only* option. There are costs and benefits to walking away, and sometimes the benefit to individuals comes at the expense of a community or vice-versa. This Initiative aims to build individual and institutional capacity for engaging with conflict in a variety of ways, so that members of the UBC community can exercise more choice when deciding whether or how to engage with conflict.

Alignment with UBC's Strategic Plan

Shaping UBC's Next Century identifies inclusion, collaboration, and innovation as three priorities to be advanced by all the work of our institution. Conflict engagement aims to concretize these commitments through realistic and practical efforts, noting that the pursuit of inclusion, collaboration and innovation *requires* engaging with conflict.

The road to inclusion, collaboration and innovation is paved with conflict.

Inclusion is the commitment to access, success, and representation of systemically marginalized groups of people. Meeting this commitment necessitates wading through historic conflicts and their legacies. Difficult and emotionally charged conversations are to be expected. Without a commitment to engaging in uncomfortable conversations the commitment to inclusion is meaningless.

Collaboration is about bringing different points of view to the table. The benefits of collaboration are well-known. But a multiplicity of views can also make for a difficult and slow group process. We need conflict engagement skills in order to work with the rub of our differences across disciplines, cultures, and power distances. Without skills in engaging conflict, collaboration can be inefficient and frustrating.

Innovation is the by-product of working through conflict. Disruptive ideas do not grow in risk-averse, conflict-avoidant cultures. Conflict invites us to be more explicit in our thinking and refine our ideas in response to critique. Often creative solutions emerge precisely because we disagree on the obvious answers. Without the ability to lean towards conflict, we run the risk of leaving truly transformative possibilities on the table.

Structural Factors and Conflict Propensity

Certain characteristics of the university environment make it prone to conflict in ways that differ from other institutions. Some of the same factors also make universities fertile ground for productively engaging conflict. They include:

Primacy of open discourse and argumentation - Challenging the methods and ideas of others is core to the academic discourse that permeates the university. As debate becomes passionate, it can be experienced as conflictual, particularly when the cultural norms of argumentation are new, unspoken, or changing. Academic debates that are framed clearly and carried out constructively fulfill their role as an essential vehicle for advancing knowledge and practice.

Unique governance structures – Decision making at the university depends on a mixture of hierarchical and democratic processes. The tenure structure, for example, introduces hierarchy that expands power distances between faculty by rank, and between faculty, staff and students, while collegial governance models – faculty management committees, administrative advisory bodies, student governments – shorten power distances and put checks and balances in place. Other stakeholders within our system such as unions and associations, alumni and donors also shape the governance landscape, as does the intersection of positional rank and status with personal rank and privilege. The results are a complex web of relationships, where both power struggles and abuses of power are possible. When members of our community use their personal and positional power responsibly and constructively, they can prevent conflict escalation and create opportunities for fruitful engagement with differences.

Societal role and responsibility - At UBC we aspire to have impact on the region and the world around us. This in turn means that we are entangled in the issues of the world. There are unresolved and ongoing struggles in our societies arising from historic patterns, such as colonization, patriarchy, systemic racism, and current turmoil such as political polarization and the threat of environmental collapse. The simultaneous commitments to diversity, justice, and free expression invite the largest societal debates to our campuses. The opportunity is to find productive ways to work with these tensions, and to inspire the world.

We cannot ignore the contribution of such fundamental structural factors to interpersonal or intergroup conflicts at UBC. Nor should we assign *all* responsibility for conflict to structural factors, or assume that structures are fixed and unchangeable. Engaging conflict with more ease and confidence can enable critical conversations that transform those structures that no longer serve us.

Costs of Conflict Escalation

When conflicts escalate, as they often do when they are not engaged early or constructively, both individuals and the university community can bear enormous costs. Being aware of these costs allows for more informed assessment every time we choose whether and how to engage with tensions.

Wellbeing
Being trapped in conflict without a productive way out can be very hard on the morale, mental health, and wellbeing of individuals, including those caught in the middle of conflicts and those indirectly involved. Graduation delays, sick leaves and turnover are potential side effects of conflict escalation.

Time
Substantial amounts of time are spent dealing with conflicts, particularly those that have not been addressed in a timely way. Teams that cannot work their way through conflict are less productive and less creative. Time spent on resolution of disagreements is well worth it as it helps prevent escalation.

Money

The costs to individuals who are party to serious conflicts include financial loss, risks to employability, mobility or career advancement, and legal costs. The university also incurs costs related to sick leaves, turnover and donor loss when conflict is not addressed well. Investigation of formal complaints can be expensive, as are legal fees, and other potential liabilities associated with a complaint.

Reputation

When a conflict becomes public via media, social media, or word of mouth, it can cause irreparable damage to the reputation of people or the institution. Even more costly is the loss of relationships and the erosion of trust in the institution, internally and externally.

Opportunity Costs

To the degree that conflict can unleash creativity, innovation, transformative learning and change, we are losing out when we fail to engage conflict constructively.

Common Responses to Conflict

Most people in the UBC community have not had formal education in how to address conflict. Many of us default to approaches with which we are most familiar or comfortable –often learned in our families of origin- but do not make a conscious decision among the approaches available to us. In the wake of conflict, members of our UBC community respond in ways ranging from shaking it off, to gossiping, to gently confronting, to publicly attacking each other. But are we choosing with awareness of the intended and unintended consequences?

When we find ourselves in conflict that we don't want or cannot walk away from, we have a number of paths available to us within the cultures and systems of the university. Broadly speaking, they are:

1. **Speaking with those with whom we are in conflict**
2. **Seeking help from a third party to address the conflict**
3. **Requesting that authorities adjudicate our conflict**

There is no inherent hierarchy to these options. They may all be necessary in order to satisfy and protect people with intersecting rights, interests, and preferences. The 1st option (e.g. having a difficult conversation with a colleague) and 2nd option (e.g. asking a manager to mediate) are essential for building relationships of trust and strengthening joined problem solving. The 3rd option (e.g. filing a complaint under one of UBC's policies) is needed to address complex conflicts, breaches of protected rights, and cases of abuse. The misuse or over-reliance on any of these approaches can be damaging. Therefore, building the capacity to exercise choice among these options is very important for the health and wellbeing of our community.

Modalities for Addressing Differences

At UBC, Administrative Heads of Units are responsible for ensuring compliance with UBC's policies. When a conflict leads to a grievance or complaint process, Administrative Heads of Units, sometimes supported by specialized administrative functions, conduct investigations and address any wrongdoings in accordance with UBC policies.

The lens provided by compliance policies and procedures is key. And, in many cases, leaders would benefit from additional lenses or modalities by which a conflict situation could be understood and explored, and potentially de-escalated or resolved. They include:

Critical Mode

We can analyze and deconstruct conflict within the frame of relevant and current intellectual discourses, which illuminate, for example, historic patterns in power relations that have a bearing on a current conflict and how it is being experienced.

Dialogic Mode

We can bring parties together to explore conflicts in a non-judgmental space using a facilitated or mediated approach that treats multiple stories as valid, and helps people understand each other and move towards joint problem-solving.

Embodied Mode

We can help people negotiate their differences by using non-dialogic tools ranging from ritual and ceremony, the use of the arts, cultural immersion, and sports, relying on the power of shared embodied experience to build empathy and restore relationships.

It is uncertain whether any of the above approaches are effective on their own in helping parties work through their differences and improve their selves, relationships, or structures. Each modality has certain strengths and weaknesses. As they develop skill and comfort with conflict engagement, leaders and third parties can creatively weave these different modes together to meet the needs of specific conflict situations.

A Capacity Building Initiative

This Initiative articulates the need, and marks the beginning, of an effort to build widespread capacity across our institution, in recognition of the educational mission of the university and the challenges into which conflict invites us. It is crucial to recognize that the responsibility for bringing up and engaging differences cannot rest entirely or even primarily with those who have relatively little power at the university. Instead, the responsibility to invite and hold space for conversations around differences that matter should increase along with the level of power and position at the university.

This Initiative calls for a tiered capacity building approach in which:

Every member of the university community is equipped with conflict literacy.

Conflict literacy is defined as the basic awareness, knowledge, skill, and practical wisdom for productively engaging in conflicts in which we find ourselves. Conflict literacy includes, but is not limited to: emotional management, the ability to name power and positionality, the ability to take different perspectives, and the basic knowledge of relevant policies and resources.

All leaders of academic and non-academic units develop their conflict fluency.

Conflict fluency is defined as leadership competencies for assisting parties who are in conflict with one another. Conflict fluency includes conflict literacy as well as a thorough understanding of institutional policies, convening power and skill, conflict coaching, and preventing escalation through day-to-day leadership.

A small team of specialists can be called upon for their conflict expertise.

We will continue to have a need for individuals whose roles, embedded across various university functions, focus specifically on various forms of conflict engagement, particularly to handle situations in which conflict has escalated. The university community will call on the expertise, advice, and specialized services of these individuals, who work as a network for creative and timely interweaving of embodied, dialogic, critical, and compliance approaches to conflict.

Final Thought

This Initiative sets an ambitious vision for UBC in the realm of conflict engagement. We have the possibility to become a leading institution in this area if we can establish a living lab in which we not only talk about engaging with conflict, but we do it effectively. In meeting leaning into and facing our conflicts we can create a reality that's more reflective of our articulated values and commitments. As James Baldwin once said:

"Not everything that is faced can be changed. But nothing can be changed until it is faced."