Human Contact and Human Conflict

Take a look at a typical day on a pre-pandemic Full-Circle Learning Piru summer school campus. The scene reveals the power of human touch in cementing bonds.

Humans long for connection. It seems self-evident, but indeed, we often miss opportunities to weave the fabric of supportive learning relationships within our reach.

Trust Preserves Health

The video discussed two important studies that confirm the benefits of human contact. A global 2021 study compared the value of trust as the best predictor of resiliency to illness. That's right. Among wide-ranging factors evaluated in 177 nations, the mere presence of trust proved more important than any other indicator that a country would reduce its cases of Covid-19 and improve human health. The study was carried out by an independent think tank, the Council on Foreign Relations' (CFR) global health programme, and researchers from the University of Washington's School of Medicine. They discovered a lower rate of infections per capita in nations where survey respondents reported a high level of trust toward their government and other citizens. A medical journal reported:

> The findings indicated that if all societies had trust in government at least as high as [those] … in the 75th percentile, the world would have experienced 13% fewer infections. If social trust—trust in other people—reached the same level, the effect would be even larger, with 40% fewer infections globally. (1)

Trust Advances Social Cohesion

A second concept of interest, intergroup contact theory, has resurged based on the theories pioneered by psychologist Gordon Allport in the 1950s. In recent applications of contact theory, two people from opposing racial, ethnic, or religious factions came together face to face for personal conversations. Given a chance to connect around everyday issues, they easily established personal relationships. Regardless of whether they changed their wholesale bias toward the opposing group, they tended to, at the very least, find their opponents likeable, making participants better able to respond to someone regarded as “the other.” Even brief interpersonal contact helped them work together more cohesively with the members of the group they had formerly opposed. (2)

Trust Requires Talk

One case study occurred in 1971, when KKK activist C.P. Ellis and civil rights leader Ann Atwater had nearly killed each other in public debates. Suddenly, when the Durham, South Carolina School District faced a desegregation order, Ellis and Atwater stood face to face on an integrated steering committee. They began to see that poor white children and black children faced similar challenges in their school district. The two of them, in fact, realized that their own family dynamics, not spite for innocent children, had contributed to their sense of animosity.

One day, they went to lunch together. They began to casually meet as friends and discover common ground. Ellis became a community organizer. Over time, they formed such a deep friendship, in fact, that when the former white supremacist passed away, he requested, in advance, that his good friend Ann Atwater deliver the eulogy at his funeral. (3)

Trust Tames Trauma

Think about these examples in relation to cognition. The affective processing system reacts to stimuli without conscious thought. In contrast, the conscious cognitive system analyzes and adapts to incoming information. Emotions—positive or negative—generally begin with a

change in the affective system, bringing new processing challenges for the cognitive mind.

In a tense situation, the brain is awash with adrenaline, triggering a fight-or-flight response that can limit the capacity to think clearly. (This is why most people find it easier to sing in the shower than onstage, or to remember a speech in front of the mirror than in front of a microphone, or to perform a math function when *not* taking the final exam.)

Positive changes in the affective system, however, such as light laughter or soft music, bring relief and support for cognition. We readily answer questions or talk with friends. With the mind at ease, we turn our attention more easily to the other. We think with clarity and creativity.

Thus, the cognitive system can be either overwhelmed or be enhanced by the affective system. Teachers can foster the conditions that bend toward a harmonious system, both in the learner and within the circle of learners.

Learning tends to flow when students work side by side with a sense of connection, joyfully anticipating the outcome of a project rather than fearful of negative expressions and divisive comments. According to Norman, “Negative affect has the potential to make simple tasks more difficult or complicated, while positive affect can help reduce the difficulty of complex tasks.” (4)

We might deduce, then, that *trust* itself benefits from positive rather than negative input between co-learners, and that their equal sense of value to the group can literally improve cognitive performance.

These and many more examples confirm what educators have long observed in the classroom—that as we create opportunities for learners to build trust in one another and to develop authentic, caring relationships, we advance their capacity to collaborate, to solve problems, and to integrate their unique capacities in the promotion of good will, despite basic differences, just as the many systems of the world will call upon them to do as they later pursue their lifework.

A Taste of Trust

Wise teachers intertwine social cohesion strategies and academic approaches that inherently lay the foundation for empathy. They deliberately motivate the desire to see through the eyes of another and to act on a common desire for the needs of a broader society. After all, if universal trust can improve health across a nation and around the globe, imagine what it can do in your classroom!

Invite students to the table. Give them a taste of trust.

Trust-building Strategies

A Treasure Hunt for Points of Connection

1. Pair students with partners. Link them from opposite ends of the room, to build relationships among those who do not normally sit together.
2. Offer a prompt related to your subject matter, or simply ask them to find a common point of connection. For example, you might give high school students a theme such as “Childhood memories that have shaped the best parts of you.” Let them share their thoughts until they and their partner find a common value or similar thread in a story.
3. Each person then makes a positive statement about the other. They stand and introduce their partner to the class based on what they appreciate or based on a common understanding. Rather than focusing on differences or on superficial similarities, they strive to perceive transcendent aspects of their humanness. This strategy can be adapted for the age level of your students.

Humanity Circle

Some educators extend the concept of the Human Family introductions into a daily tradition. Each day, a new prompt builds a sense of family within the group. The layer cake strategy works well for this discussion, a strategy in

which the learners will generate a fortress of wisdom on which all may later find strength. The topic might relate to tips for personal resilience or to solutions regarding a current event, or it may pose a challenge related to the habit-of-heart.

For example, the teacher might say:

> Our code-of-ethics indicates that *We all contribute to our learning community*. It is hard to do that when so many people at our school struggle to get to school. Some live far away. Some do not transportation. Others have parents who leave early in the morning and cannot help them get ready. It seems we need many different solutions to help everyone. As a classroom family, we want to help everyone find equal learning time. Let's see how many different solutions we can think of to ease the challenge. We will start at one end of the room and to move toward the other. Try to suggest something no one else has said.

You will then draw a box on the board and write a key word on it. Circling around the room, each student will add a suggestion. Have a student scribe write their key words in the boxes that layer upon the first, until you have a tall stack of boxes representing the classroom door.

This strategy can be adapted for any open-ended question, to provoke contemplation on academic content or to promote bonding around an issue. It urges students to listen rather than repeat one another. It illustrates that one collective response is more effective that a single reply.

Some days, the Humanity Circle can address a student concern, but always, it involves the layering of responses around the circle. If a student passes, the teacher says, "I'll return to you at the end." This incentivizes the students to listen and contribute rather than waiting until it requires more thinking for an original reply.

A Humanity Circle topic can also become a journal prompt, to encourage effective writing skills. Whether spoken or written, the habit-of-heart plays a key role in the conversation. A new teacher once wrote the topic on the board, "What would you do if you had a million dollars?" The principal walked into the room and asked him, "What emotions do you intend to evoke with this question? Will it create desire for unity, for purpose, and for

skills or for competition and luxuries the children cannot access?” The teacher and principal discussed the habit-of-heart, the geography and science content of the week, and the teacher revised the question to: What would you do, as an advocate of biological research, if you had a million dollars to help the endangered species of the deserts of the world?

Your Humanity Circle Question can be simple or complex, as long as it it strengthens connections and lays the groundwork for building trust. If it also reinforces the habit-of-heart and the academic content, you’ll never run out of topics.

Tightening the Circle

On the last day of a semester or schoolyear, teachers sometimes ask each student to think about what they treasure in their classmates. Each person brings at least one great quality to the table.

Each student writes their name on a piece of paper at the top of the page. They pass it to their left. The students then proceed to write what they appreciate most about the student whose name appears before them. At an appropriate interval, everyone passes to the left again.

By the time each classmate receives the page with their name on it, they will see a list of the qualities that endear them to others. With judgements allayed, anxiety reduced, and bonds cemented, the trust in the group increases along with the motivation. The page also becomes a keepsake for a student who formerly felt insecure about their value in the classroom family.

Empathy-Building Strategies

Most conflicts begin with hurt feelings resulting in misunderstandings or judgements. They end in stalemate or worse when those perceptions go unchecked. If we were to remove blame from our personal disputes, we would find it easier not only to see new options but also to restore dignity and trust.

Download the conflict bridge attachment and review the steps participants take as they walk toward one another.

The conflict bridge teaches its participants to bridge a conflict by 1) seeing through the eyes of another; 2) suspending judgement; and 3) focusing inwardly on our own attempt to apply the habit-of-heart as we seek solutions to a problem.

This tool teaches students to prepare for situations they will face throughout their lives as family members, friends, community members, co-workers or even community and world leaders. These tips may prove helpful as you adapt the strategy for classroom use.

- Paper steps can easily substitute for a vinyl bridge.
- Using the curriculum as a starting point, students can practice resolving a conflict in history, a problem among characters in a book or story, or a situation described in actual current events. They can prepare to teach community members to resolve challenges associated with an upcoming service project.
- Only after the students have learned how to use the bridge hypothetically should the teacher then incorporate it as a behavior management tool when students disagree.
- The teacher serves as mediator and the classmates as the conscience. The teacher can stop the process and ask the conscience to offer suggestions or ideas if the two people on the bridge need to hear more information on step three to evoke empathy, or if they need help with creative solutions on step five as they each strive to demonstrate the habit-of-heart. The conscience

can offer creative ideas when the two players run out of ideas. Note that there is room for paraphrasing but never a place where a partner can accuse the other of causing hurt feelings. They can only state a feeling.

- Also note that you would not pit a child against a parent or a student against a teacher. Conflicts should be resolved among those with equal amounts of authority.
- You may also want to give players fictitious names, so the class knows they are role playing, even as the experience offers solutions for their future real-world conflicts.
- A final word of counsel: If two players cannot see from the perspective of the other, you can have them switch places on step three and actually speak for the other, then switch back again. This sometimes literally helps them understand what it means to walk in the footsteps of another.

Over time, students will amaze you with their creative ideas as they learn a communication system focused on listening and empathizing instead of on judgement. Review these scenarios as you consider how to use this tool in your classroom.

Classroom Conflict for the Habit-of-Heart: Empathy

Child 1: I want you to give me the library book you took from my sister.

Child 2: I want not to be accused of something I didn't do.

Child 1: I feel angry. (May not explain why until hearing the other.)

Child 2: I feel upset.

Child 1: I feel angry because my sister is small and does not defend herself. Everyone thinks they can take advantage of her, so she is always hurt and has things taken from her.

Child 2: I feel upset because I am smallest in my family and can do little when I receive blame. I often feel hurt even though I have done nothing. Now I feel that way again.

Child 1: I understand that you feel upset because too often you feel blame that you don't deserve, and this feels the same way to you.

Child 2: I understand that you feel angry on behalf of your sister, who also receives blame, and you are trying to defend her.

Teacher (serving as mediator, speaking to the class): What do we hear from the conscience?

Conscience: They both feel almost the same thing!

Mediator: Ahh, that sounds true. Let's see if that will help them practice the habit-of-heart, which is Empathy.

Child 1: Maybe I can try to help. Maybe I can walk you to the library when I take my sister, so you can both have a book. I see that you are both feeling the same way.

Child 2: Maybe I can try to help. I didn't take the book, but I can invite the boy who did, so we can all go together, and everyone will have books.

Teacher: (to the Conscience): Do you think they were able to see through each other's eyes?

Class: Yes!

Teacher: Then they are ready to shake hands, hug or fist bump in agreement. By practicing the habit-of-heart, they each made new friends.

Community Conflict Linking Unity and a Water Project

Student 1: I have come with talk to you about typhoid. You live near the river. I want to know we have your support for adding chlorine to the water.

Student 2: You want my support, but I want you to stop this project altogether and leave my doorstep.

Student 1: I feel worried.

Student 2: I feel attacked.

Student 1: I feel worried because so many people have become ill. My own brother is lying in bed with typhoid. The health workers tell us we must clean the water.

Student 2: I feel attacked, because you know that my people do not believe in adding things to the water. We drink it the way nature made it. I think you are standing against me because you are from a different tribe. You and the workers want to poison in the water. We have become ill before when people said they were trying to help us. I have to think of my children now.

Student 1: I hear you saying that you do not trust the researchers and the members of my tribe. I hear you saying that you fear we will put poison in the water, and you worry about your children.

Student 2: I hear you saying that you too worry about your family, especially your brother. You think that you will save the lives of the people by listening to the health officials and putting the chlorine in our water.

Student 1: Maybe together we can find a solution. I will invite you to my place. I will also invite the doctor, who will explain how the chlorine works. If you still don't want to take part, we will build a dam, so the chlorine doesn't reach the area near your home. Then I will simply pray for your health.

Student 2: I see that you are trying to create unity. Maybe I can do something as well. I will bring our tribal council leader when I go to your home. We will talk about what is best for the people. After all, the water travels from here to there without knowing who will drink it—who it will serve and who will become ill.

Student 1: I like your idea. Maybe later we can make a practice of visiting each others' communities, to solve problems that affect both tribes. We can end with singing and dancing.

Student 2: I would like that a great deal. My fears are calm now. Let me embrace you, my brother.

Reshaping History with Compassion on the Conflict Bridge

Student 1: My name is Cesar Chavez. I have come to make the farms safer for the people. I want you to treat your field workers better.

Student 2: I want you to go away. Just let me run my farm.

Student 1: I feel frustrated.

Student 2: I feel discouraged.

Student 1: I feel frustrated because I have come a long way to help people who are often hurt on machinery and who feel hungry because they work long hours with little pay. I can only help them if you will listen.

Student 2: I feel discouraged because it has been a difficult year. I cannot find enough people to work the land, as much as I stretch the money I have. I do not have extra cash to buy new equipment. I just need to harvest the food, so we can send it to markets to feed others, who are also hungry.

Student 1: I hear you saying that you are not having a good year. You cannot add more safety features, and you need every worker to harvest the food and get it to market, so everyone can eat.

Student 2: And I hear you saying that you feel frustrated because you have come so far to help, only to find there are few ways to help the workers.

Mediator (to the class): Today, as we look into the hearts of the two on this bridge, does the conscience think they heard one another?

Class member: I would like to hear from the farmer what will happen if the food makes a profit this year. Could the money go toward safety equipment or food for the workers?

Mediator: Maybe the farmer is listening. Let's see how it works out. On the next step, each one has to say what *they* can do to practice the habit-of-heart, Compassion.

Student 1: I can see that you only have a small farm. Maybe the workers and I can advise you on some new growing methods to bring a bigger harvest, since they have been farming for so long.

Student 2: Well, maybe I can set aside for each worker a little patch of land for their families. In addition to what they earn, they will also have extra food to feed their families, because they know the land so well.

Student 1: And if you make a profit, perhaps you can buy safe equipment. If the workers chip in, the cost and the tools can be shared by the farm as well as the families working their plots.

Student 2: Good idea. They can sign up to use the tools. I will shorten their days, so they have the energy. Let's shake hands and begin working out our plan together.

To the Counselor or Learning Leader

If you were a counselor at a school, you may be asked to work with students about to engage in a severe argument or even a violent fight. When adrenaline rises and tempers flare, students may feel negative affective emotions. Before asking them to go to the conflict bridge, you will want to help students gain control of their own impulses. Guided imagery, when used twice weekly, can help learners in the general classroom regulate their habits of thinking and feeling and reduce anxieties associated with learning. It can be used with individual learners in special circumstances such as emotional outbursts that precede the conflict bridge. More information is provided in an upcoming session Loving the Exceptional Learner. You may also obtain a book of guided imagery exercises online called The Sky Belongs to Everyone, published by North Atlantic Press, at amazon.com.

Refer to the Review Questions. Then move on to complete the activities.

Session Activity 1: Review the downloadable Conflict Bridge Steps. Brainstorm and describe a scenario that could serve as a hypothetical conflict resolution challenge in your classroom. How does it relate to the project and the habit-of-heart? Does it reinforce your academic content? Your coach or instructor may want you to share your idea for five points. If not, test it out with a friend or family member!

Session Activity 2: Imagine yourself the member of the administrative team responsible for staff development. At a mid-year meeting, your team will determine which strategies teachers want or need to strengthen throughout the remainder of the year. Each person will anonymously self-evaluate before the discussion.

Review the dowloadable Full-Circle Learning Schoolwide Evaluation that serves as the basis for this activity. You will note that broad community impact is the first indicator of success.

As you read through the definitions of mastery, think about how many of these categories call on the teachers to develop trusting relationships, student to student, teacher to student, and class to community. Highlight the words that call for activities that build trust and unity.

Session Activity 3: Look at the downloadable 20 Marks of a Full-Circle Learning School. Underline those items that that cultivate or rely on trust and unity.

With your peers, discuss the role of relationship building in the overall success of a school.

Your instructor or coach may ask you to turn in your highlighted sheets, for 15 extra points. If not, keep them for your own future use when you lead your own school!

1) Jacqui Thornton. Covid-19: Trust in government and other people linked with lower infection rate and higher vaccination uptake. BMJ 2022; 376:o292. February 2, 2022.
2) Thomas Fraser Pettigrew. Annual Review of Psychology, 49: February, 1998. 65-85 Gordon Allport
3) Oliver, Myrna (November 9, 2005). "C.P. Ellis, 78; Once a Ku Klux Klan Leader, He Became a Civil Rights Activist". Los Angeles Times. Retrieved March 14, 2019; Durham 150 (2019-11-02). Durham 150 Closing Ceremony Program.
4) Don Norman. Emotion and Design: Attractive Things Work Better. (2005) Interaction Design Foundation, 2005.