

## EXPERIENCE EXCHANGE

# A student-led interprofessional workshop on conflict management style

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## ABSTRACT

Student leadership in interprofessional education is known to bring positive influences to learning collaborative skills for nursing and other health professional trainees. Yet a scarce number of student-led interprofessional activities are described in the literature. This report describes one student-led interprofessional education workshop that is facilitated by personnel from a faculty interprofessional education program. Undergraduate students (N = 23) from nursing, allied health and social service training programs at one university in Toronto, Canada, participated in a one-time workshop regarding conflict management style. Findings from our evaluation survey showed that the workshop was well-received by participants and demonstrated utility and feasibility. Such outcomes provide supportive evidence for fostering student leadership in designing and implementing interprofessional teaching.

**Key Words:** Student leadership, Interprofessional education, Conflict management, Nursing undergraduate education

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Student leadership in interprofessional education is being advocated by experts in this field for its benefits. For example, Hoffman, Rosenfield, Gilbert, and Oandasan<sup>[1]</sup> suggest student leadership in interprofessional education enhances sustainability and effectiveness and improves collaborative competence. They also suggest that student leadership in interprofessional education is best supported by faculty mentorship and the establishment of infrastructure from an educational institution.

This paper describes one student-led interprofessional education workshop in nursing, allied health and social service disciplines that was facilitated by a university faculty, as

well as preliminary findings that demonstrate the utility and feasibility of this initiative's favourable outcomes. Utility and feasibility are two main standards in education program evaluation.<sup>[2]</sup>

## 2. BACKGROUND

### 2.1 Description of student leadership in interprofessional education

As a part of an interprofessional education initiative, the Interprofessional Student Association (ISA) was formed at a university in the province of Ontario, Canada in 2009. From the outset, the main objective of the group was described as: 1) to learn with, from, and about each other; 2) to en-

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courage mutual respect, communication, and collaboration between disciplines; and 3) to advocate for interprofessional awareness.

The ISA continues to be a student-led group that aims to raise awareness of interprofessional education and collaboration across campus. It is led by a team of four to eight student executives in nursing, allied health and social science disciplines. Members are recruited primarily from the undergraduate student population. The ISA holds workshops and presentations throughout the school year to help prepare students for working across professional boundaries by learning with, from, and about other professionals and different programs within the Faculty of Community Services (early childhood studies, child and youth care, nutrition and food, nursing, urban and regional planning, midwifery education, occupational and public health, social work, and disability studies). Topics of workshops ran by the ISA have included: power and equity in interprofessional team-based service coordination; discussions around person-centered care; scenario-based activities related to role clarification; and workshops on conflict and communication methods for managing conflict, which is the focus of this report.

The university supported the establishment of a student group in this area by assigning the interprofessional education (IPE) project manager to be a liaison for the group, and by allocating a budget for IPE workshops to be delivered by the ISA. Specific support in developing this workshop is described in Methods section.

## 2.2 Conflict and conflict management in interprofessional education

Conflict is defined as “the internal or external discord that results from differences in ideas, values, or feelings between two or more people”.<sup>[3]</sup> Because of the complex and interpersonal nature of group or teamwork, conflict and conflict management are crucial in advancing outcomes of teamwork, including intra- and inter-professional health care teams.<sup>[4]</sup> Leever et al.<sup>[5]</sup> proposed that conflict may be both an antecedent and an outcome of collaborative practice; the authors also suggest that conflict management actions are dependent upon several factors, including one’s knowledge in conflict management. Student executives in the ISA believed that part of such knowledge included an awareness of one’s own conflict management style, which was the focus of the interprofessional workshop in this paper.

## 3. METHOD

### 3.1 Design and setting

A descriptive study using survey methodology was used to evaluate the utility and feasibility of a workshop that took

place in a large classroom within the campus of a university in the province of Ontario, Canada.

### 3.2 Description of the student-led conflict management workshop

The objective of the interactive workshop was to enhance participants’ personal understanding of conflict resolution in accordance with the five Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Resolution Modes (TKCRM) of behavior: avoiding, competing, accommodating, compromising, and collaborating.<sup>[6,7]</sup> In the workshop, participants explored the different modes of behavior in situations of conflict, and worked to better understand how each mode can play a role in achieving a resolution. The stated learning outcomes were for participants to: a) understand different modes of handling conflict; b) identify the mode that she or he will likely adopt; and c) enhance the skill and confidence to adopt a conflict management style by being able to choose how to act, rather than just react.

A variety of teaching techniques were chosen to help participants learn about conflict and conflict management within groups, such as small group discussions, debriefings facilitated by members of the ISA, and didactic teaching about the types of conflict resolution modes.

### 3.3 Participants

Students (N = 23) enrolled in academic programs within the Faculty of Community Services (e.g., nursing, social work, nutrition, early childhood studies) were recruited to participate in this workshop as an interprofessional education activity. There were no exclusion criteria.

### 3.4 Variables and instrumentation

According to the Joint Committee on Standards for Education Evaluation (2011),<sup>[2]</sup> the utility of an education program focuses on providing the appropriate information to the intended users, and its feasibility ensures that the program is realistic, prudent, diplomatic, and cost-effective. There is no known instrument that evaluates the utility and feasibility of student-led interprofessional activities.

A 12-item survey that was used in other interprofessional workshops at the Faculty of Community Services provided some insight regarding the utility and feasibility of this workshop, and it was administered to our participants (see Tables 1 and 2). Of the items, four questions employed a 5-point Likert scale, one question used a dichotomous response, and the remaining six questions were open-ended. These items assessed the quality (e.g., clear goals), usefulness (e.g., helped to understand), and relevance of the workshop.

### 3.5 Procedure

Student executives from ISA developed key ideas for the workshop with assistance from the project manager of the faculty's IPE office. The ISA executive members and the IPE project manager co-developed the workshop around the Thomas-Kilmann Management-of-Differences Exercise (MODE),<sup>[6]</sup> a measure for individuals to determine their own primary behavior in response to interpersonal conflict. A series of planning meetings were held where it was determined how the instrument would be most meaningfully delivered to participants, given the variety of disciplines that could be represented at the workshop. The workshop consisted of four parts: 1) ice-breaker activity that instigates participant interest; 2) short presentation explaining the different modes of conflict resolution (e.g., competing, avoiding); 3) interactive activity that allows application of the five modes of conflict resolution; and 4) debriefing to consolidate learning.

At the beginning of the workshop, facilitators welcomed participants and provided an overview of all the procedures of the workshop; as well, emphasized the importance of maintaining a safe environment for each other by respecting everyone's opinion. Given the stated workshop objective of helping participants identify their own primary mode of behavior in response to conflict situations, participants were asked to fill out a survey with questions related to a number of conflict scenarios prior to receiving any information on the specific modes of conflict resolution.<sup>[7]</sup> The intent was to empower participants with knowledge relating to their own primary mode. This allowed them to meaningfully self-reflect on whether they could be behaving differently in conflict situations to achieve a more desired outcome, regardless of the nature and context of a conflict. Following the survey, a PowerPoint presentation included an explanation of the TKCRM, highlighting the five modes. During the presentation, participants were encouraged to provide examples from their own professional or personal experience of each mode of conflict resolution.

Next, students were asked to divide into groups. Efforts were made to ensure that each group contained students from more than one program of study. All groups were presented with the same conflict scenario: a social interaction between two individuals (A and B) who share different opinions on how to proceed with organizing a party. Each team was then given a piece of paper outlining two distinct Thomas-Kilmann<sup>[7]</sup> modes of conflict resolution. Each group was instructed to formulate a response from hypothetical individual A to the scenario, using only the first assigned conflict resolution mode (e.g., compromising) within an allotted time period. Specifically, each group was asked to write down what hypothetical individual A might say in response to the social

interaction.

Without discussion, the paper from each group was rotated to a different group. Within the allotted time period, each group was now asked to formulate a reaction from hypothetical individual B using the second specified mode of conflict resolution (e.g., collaborating). Once the responses were completed, the responses from individual A and individual B were read aloud by each group.

To explore whether knowledge about the components of each mode was consolidated by the workshop participants, they were asked to identify which mode they felt each response represented. Following this activity, debriefing highlighted the impact of responding in a mode that may be different from one's primary mode. Empowered with knowledge of the five different modes and how assertive or cooperative they are (or are not), the participants could virtually jump from mode to mode, exploring the different outcomes created by each behavior. Discussion centered on how participants can manage the outcome of a conflict situation by analyzing the interaction, determining the desired outcome, and then using the appropriate mode as a vehicle to get there. Utilizing open discussion and facilitator intervention in the debrief, new understandings of how to use the conflict resolution modes in different situations emerged. Participants were encouraged to personalize their learning by drawing links to their own practice experience, and conversations also included the various factors that influence the outcomes of conflict resolution between different groups (e.g., interprofessional groups compared to uniprofessional groups).

Participants completed the evaluation in the form of a hard-copy, anonymous survey at the end of this workshop. Surveys were administered by the project manager of the interprofessional education program at the Faculty of Community Services. Facilitators did not have knowledge of individual participants' responses on this survey.

### 3.6 Analysis

Descriptive statistics was used to describe participant feedback. Responses from the six open-ended questions were reviewed and then organized by themes.

## 4. RESULTS

Participants (N = 23) were from three disciplines: 19 from nursing, 2 from social work, and 2 from nutrition. The dominant number of nurse participants is consistent with nursing having the largest enrolment within the university. Demographic information was not collected.

Overall, the interprofessional workshop led by students was very well received by participants. As can be seen in Table 1,

most participants were in agreement about the relevance and applicability of this workshop to interprofessional collaboration (95.5%). In the open-ended questions (see Table 2), we learned that participants felt the workshop was relevant to interprofessional collaboration because: a) it introduced the modes of conflict management so that they could antic-

ipate different behaviors in future situations (46.7%); b) it enhanced understanding of self in a conflict situation (20%); and c) it provided a platform to learn about how disciplines may have different approaches to and understandings of conflict management (20%).

**Table 1.** Participants’ response to Likert scale and dichotomous items

Question	Responses (% , N = 22)					
	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree	No response or not applicable
The purpose was clearly stated.	0	0	0	13.6	81.8	4.5
Flow of information was appropriate for my learning needs.	0	0	4.5	13.6	77.3	0
Activity was useful in demonstrating interprofessional collaboration.	0	0	0	18.2	77.3	4.5
Discussion helped me understand interprofessional collaboration.	0	0	4.5	27.3	63.6	0
	Yes	No	No response or not applicable			
Would recommend to someone else.	95.5	0	4.5			

**Table 2.** Themes extracted from participants’ responses to open-ended questions

Question	Theme 1 (n, %)	Theme 2 (n, %)	Theme 3 (n, %)	Theme 4 (n, %)
How did this workshop contribute to your understanding of IPE?	Learned about modes of conflict resolution and how they apply to actual situation (7, 46.7%)	Enhanced insight on self in conflict management (3, 20%)	Met people from other disciplines and learned about their opinions on this topic (3, 20%)	Topic relevant to own studies (2, 13.3%)
How did your learning today contribute to your practice?	Knowledge on modes of conflict management helped anticipate behaviors in actual situation (10, 50%)	Learned about own conflict management style, helped handling future situations (4, 20%)	Able to share today’s learning to work, placement, or personal issues (4, 20%)	Applicable to both work and life (did not elaborate) (2, 10%)
Name one thing you will change tomorrow as a result of this experience.	Become more accommodating to different approaches to conflict (8, 47.1%)	Self-improvement: work on strengths or weaknesses (6, 35.3%)	Enhanced confidence in future conflicts (2, 11.8%)	Understand conflict management is contextual and thus, will be flexible (1, 5.9%)
What I like the best ...	Interactive activity (12, 70.6%)	Safe and welcoming learning environment (2, 11.8%)	Clarity in presentation and flow (2, 11.8%)	Sharing of personal examples (1, 5.9%)
What I like the least ...	Not using an interprofessional scenario for teaching conflict management (2, 33.3%)	Timing and setting (long, late hours) (2, 33.3%)	Learning from undergraduate peers, less convincing (1, 16.7%)	Delivery (use of PowerPoint and enthusiasm) (1, 16.7%)
What I would like to change ...	Nothing (3, 37.5%)	Clarity in scenario (2, 25%)	Address interprofessional issues in conflict management (2, 25%)	More role-playing (1, 12.5%)
I recommend this to others because ...	Informative and enhances practice (5, 38.5%)	Style of presentation, engaging (4, 30.8%)	Self-enhancement, add to resume (3, 23.1%)	Free workshop (1, 7.7%)

In terms of delivery, 90.9% and 95.5% of participants were in agreement (“agree” and “strongly agree”) that the delivery was clear and the flow was appropriate. This was supported

by responses to open-ended questions when participants were asked what they liked the most about the workshop. Nevertheless, the authors noted 4.5% (n = 1) of participant did not

respond to the question regarding clear purpose.

An overwhelming majority of participants (95.5%) stated they would recommend this workshop to others. When asked to explain the reason behind their recommendation, a majority of participants stated they felt that the content in this workshop was helpful to enhance collaboration (38.5%) and that materials were well presented (30.8%).

With regards to areas of improvement (see Table 2), the most frequently raised concerns were: a) not using an interprofessional scenario for the activity (33.3%); b) timing and setting being late in the day and in a classroom that does not allow much flexibility for group work (33.3%); and c) needing more clarity and details in the scenario (25%).

## 5. DISCUSSION

In this section, we discuss our findings based on the quality, utility, and feasibility of the workshop. Regarding quality assessment, Likert scale items on “clear purpose”, “appropriate flow”, and “would recommend to others” reflected positive quality in presentation skills and organization. This was supported by the open-ended questions where participants felt that one strength of the workshop was clarity in content and flow. In addition, the objective of the workshop was met because participants expressed that the biggest gain was attainment of knowledge in conflict management styles.

One critical piece of feedback regarding this workshop concerned the integration of conflict management in interprofessional teams. The Likert scale item on understanding interprofessional collaboration received the lowest positive rating (64% in strong agreement). And, the authors noted 4.5% (n = 1) of participant did not respond to the question regarding the activity demonstrating interprofessional collaboration. This coincided with open-ended answers that included participants’ desire to apply conflict management in interprofessional settings. Such integration could be better addressed by using a case scenario of interprofessional team conflict, or an interaction between two individuals taking place in an interprofessional health or social services setting. The social interaction in this workshop was purposely chosen to set the conflict in a setting that did not belong to any specific discipline or profession because: a) the student executives who designed the workshop intended to place emphasis on the universally applicable nature of conflict management skills; and b) participants’ professional affiliation was unknown when authors planned for this workshop.

Assessment of utility included determining the appropriateness of information presented to the intended users. Responses from open-ended questions suggested participants were able to apply workshop content in personal and pro-

fessional situations, had an enhanced insight on oneself in conflict management, and developed confidence in handling future team conflicts. While information was considered useful and relevant, several participants felt that information presented by peers was less convincing than that presented by experts. These findings confirmed the specific strengths of student-led interprofessional activities: students appreciated the safe and welcoming learning environment, and the sharing of personal examples in a peer-teaching environment, as suggested by Hoffman et al.;<sup>[1]</sup> however, a supportive atmosphere alone did not address all learning needs. The credibility of the teacher remains an important factor in interprofessional education. We were unable to locate comparable data on other student-led interprofessional or team skills workshops to confirm if these learning needs were similar. However, the issue of credibility can easily be addressed by making the partnership with faculty members more apparent and including faculty collaborators in supporting future student-led workshops.

Assessment of feasibility included the viability and pragmatics of the workshop. The evaluation tool did not assess cost or organizational factors in support of this workshop. However, participants positively commented in open-ended questions on the workshop being free and the opportunity to learn about the opinions of trainees from different disciplines. Nevertheless, the timing (being late in the day) and length of workshop was a concern to some participants.

The capacity to manage conflict is also important for prelicensure nursing student participants beyond the scope of interprofessional, collaborative practice. In particular, the awareness of one’s own conflict management style will inform participants to be purposeful in their actions when handling discourse in clinical settings with intra- or interprofessional colleagues, patients and families. This is supported by preliminary research findings that suggested conflict management skills are associated with higher levels of stress resilience and psychological empowerment in undergraduate nursing students.<sup>[8]</sup>

## 6. CONCLUSION

Our report provides an example of a student-led interprofessional workshop on conflict management which is an important skill for nursing trainees. This workshop was feasible and perceived as useful by students. Future efforts should focus on evaluating all four standards in education program evaluation (utility, feasibility, propriety, and accuracy), determining the topics that are appropriate to be led by students and relevant to health and social care, and strengthening faculty mentorship of student leadership in interprofessional education.

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## CONFLICTS OF INTEREST DISCLOSURE

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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