Applying Sun Tzu's Principles to Conflict in Undergraduate Classrooms

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Abstract
During the past two decades, there have been increasing teacher-student conflicts in undergraduate classrooms. It is proposed that these conflicts may be minimized or prevented by instructors who systematically apply Sun Tzu's military principles of knowledge, assessment, adaptation, and leadership in classroom instruction. Tzu's principles could also be used in conjunction with instructional instruments designed by the author enabling instructors to establish a more productive learning environment.

Introduction
Conflicts among individuals, groups, and nations have been ongoing for centuries. The principles to prevent, conduct, and resolve wartime conflicts are examined in Sun Tzu's "The Art of War." This ancient military treatise provides invaluable insights into the ways in which conflicts may be successfully addressed.

Sun Tzu wrote "The Art of War" over two thousand years ago. Combs (2007) states that Tzu's noble status gave him the opportunity to study the strategies used by feudal lords as they fought one another, battled enemies from within their tribes, and defended their city-states from foreign invaders. Cleary (2005) describes Tzu's numerous interrelating military principles. The following four were selected by the author of this paper as being applicable to classroom instruction:

1. Knowledge: The military leader's knowledge of warfare is the basis for successful implementation of Tzu's military principles. For example, he must know his army's actual combat conditions, such as their training and discipline. The victorious commander is one who must know which leadership decisions to make, how to evaluate the battle situation, and how to adjust his military operations against the opponent's plans and strategies.
2. Assessment: Assessment helps the leader compare the military strengths and weaknesses of his army against those of his opponent. For example, commanders must know how to use their armies to overcome difficult weather conditions and how to travel in different terrains to achieve victory.
3. Adaptation: Since warfare conditions are always changing, successful commanders must be flexible and ready to make adjustments to gain advantage against the opponent. For example, if it is determined that the opponent has an advantage, decisions must be made to advance or retreat in order to weaken the power of the enemy.
4. Leadership: Knowledge, assessment and adaptation also pertain to Tzu's principles of leadership. Successful military leaders are intelligent, trustworthy, courageous, and humane. When the leader determines that military change is needed, decisions are made to strengthen the army and protect the interests of the civilian ruler and the citizens.

Combs (2000) states Tzu's philosophy has relevance in areas of competition, such as politics, economics, and law. In the political domain, the principles of preparation and planning are applied by nations when they confront one another (Rudd, 2015). Economies adapt innovative policies and strategies to improve competitive business practices (Li & Ling, 2013). Tzu's concepts are used to formulate assessment methods to help settle legal disputes in the areas of identity theft and technological patents (Savirimuthu, 2008).

Although Jeffrey (2010) states there is scant research regarding the application of Tzu's ideas to the classroom, the literature finds that Tzu's principles contained in "The Art of War" can also be applied to different levels in education. In primary and secondary schools, Wong (2008) states that administrators should use Tzu's leadership principle to inspire faculty to develop strategies for resolving classroom conflicts. Moreover, Jeffrey (2010) contends that Tzu's ideas are advantageous for undergraduate teachers when they use diaries to document teacher-student conflicts. The author contends that diaries help instructors to examine the possible reasons for classroom misbehaviors and then apply Tzu's principle of adaptation to make the pedagogical changes necessary to improve classroom behavior.

Teacher-student conflicts in undergraduate schools have been an ongoing concern for educators. Instructors have historically faced a wide variety of behavioral problems. Nineteenth century instructors had to contend with students who cheated on their exams and used foul language during instruction (Handlin & Handlin, 1970). In the 1960s, many students took over classrooms and buildings because they were against the military draft and the Vietnam War (Lee, 1970). Although most students comply with classroom behavioral codes, Bjorklund & Rehling (2010) find that during the past two decades, there have been increasing numbers of students who disrupt the learning process. These disruptions occur in different ways, such as using cell phones, texting, and playing video games in class (Hagopian, 2013). In the classroom, there are students who eat, drink, and aggressively dispute their grades (Ali & Gracey, 2013). Students also arrive late to class, leave early, sleep in class, and speak out inappropriately during instruction (Pritchard, Elison-Bowers, & Birdsall, 2009). One of several reasons for teacher-student conflict is that many instructors lack effective teaching skills. For example, Weimer (2002) finds that many instructors pay little attention towards improving their teaching practices. Bok (2013) also contends many faculty members are reluctant to improve or ignore basic pedagogical training. As a result, the author finds many instructors have inadequate pedagogical competencies in order to resolve teacher-student issues. For example, Goodboy & Bolkan (2009) state when teachers fail to clearly discuss academic standards or do not return tests and research papers on a timely basis, many students become frustrated and angry. In addition, students' feelings of motivation and confidence are diminished when teachers speak in a rude and insulting manner or display anger while attempting to clarify classroom material (McPherson & Young, 2004). Finally, Deering (2011) argues that instructors with weak teaching skills tend to ignore misconduct in the hope that it will "disappear" or avoid confronting misbehaving students for fear of poor evaluations.

Another factor affecting classroom conflict is poor academic performance by students. Frisby & Buckner (2015) find that students who receive low grades blame their teachers for the poor quality of instruction. The authors further state many of these students tend to withdraw from participating in classroom activities or disrupt the learning process. Moreover, Tantleff-Dunn, Dunn & Gokee (2010) find teacher-student conflicts develop when teachers react defensively and deny there is a problem with students who complain they were graded unfairly. The authors also state that these classroom conflicts can be reduced or eliminated if teachers acquire the pedagogical skills needed to address student issues.

Jeffrey (2010) finds that Tzu and the instructor share a common goal in doing everything possible to avoid conflicts. However, when students disrupt classroom learning, they become the opponents of the teacher. To prevent conflicts, it is necessary for teachers to establish classroom order so they can accommodate the different learning styles and skill levels of all of their students. Tzu's principles of knowledge, assessment, adaptation, and leadership can be utilized to reduce or eliminate teacher-student conflicts. Therefore, it is proposed that when Tzu's principles become an integral part of the learning process, there is greater potential for instructors to achieve a productive learning environment.

Classroom Setting-Establishing Leadership

This former associate professor of education in a northeastern, private four-year college taught students in the teacher education program. Many of these students were African-American, Asian and Hispanic. Most of these students took remedial classes in writing and mathematics. A few weeks after the start of an Educational Psychology course, this author was asked by the departmental supervisor to replace the instructor of the course. Several students were upset when the new instructor explained stricter requirements for examinations, research assignments, and grading, as compared to the previous instructor. In addition, students complained when they were no longer allowed to use cell phones, call out without permission during instruction, and walk in and out of class as they pleased. The instructor decided to adapt instructional strategies that would more effectively address the concerns of these disruptive students.

Adapting Instruction to Prevent Conflict

Tzu states that military leaders must not only rely on a set of strategies to defeat their opponents, but when conditions change, must use their knowledge, assessment and leadership abilities to make adaptations to ensure victory. These principles also have application in the teaching process. Many years of teaching experience gave this instructor the knowledge to work with diverse groups of students. These experiences also enabled the instructor to assess various ways to teach and adapt instruction to students with different learning styles and academic skill levels. The instructor took the following steps for the purpose of engaging students in the learning process. Students were given a revised syllabus describing all the subject matter to be mastered; a complete description of the exams, research paper, and grading requirements; and a list of behavioral standards for the course. Also, students were advised how to use the required textbook to answer questions on teacher-designed worksheets (Appendix A-AEQ issue webpage). Since students were preparing for teaching careers, working in groups would allow them to explain their ideas, listen to peer feedback, and justify their responses in class discussions, thereby developing their communication skills and critical thinking abilities. Furthermore, the instructor encouraged them to ask questions on how they could use the class text and the worksheets to better understand course concepts, take exams, and prepare the research project.

When it was found that students were uninvolved in performing their group tasks, pedagogical methods were adjusted. The instructor circulated among the groups to answer questions and clarify text and worksheet problems. When students were doing personal work or talking on their cell phones, the instructor reminded them to focus on the group assignment. Students who resisted were told they would be called upon to answer questions during the class discussion. These teacher-student interactions helped minimize misbehaviors because students were made aware they would be accountable for performing their tasks. Price, Handley, & Millar (2011) find a productive learning environment can be established when instructors help students understand course requirements and explain the knowledge and skills needed to meet these standards.

Assessment Practices to Prevent Conflict

A. Examinations

According to Tzu, successful military leaders assess how their own troops think and feel about their roles in combat in order to gain their loyalty. Similarly, effective instructors need to evaluate how their students think and feel about their classroom responsibilities. The instructor found that many students were unhappy about taking midterm and final exams. Students argued that preparing for these tests was difficult, because they had heavy course loads, jobs after school, and the course material to be learned left little time to study effectively. In order to avoid potential conflicts, the instructor reassured students that their concerns would be addressed. They were given specific examples of how they could use their class text, worksheets, and notes to study. Students were also encouraged to ask questions to clarify difficult concepts and taught to effectively organize their study time. Ganah (2012) believes that engaging students in the learning process promotes positive emotions, since students feel that their instructors are taking a personal interest in their academic performance.

B. Written Assignment

The instructor further observed that several students in the class were dissatisfied when they were told a research paper was required. They said the previous instructor only asked for a brief written paper instead of a more lengthy assignment. Students also complained that many of their former teachers rarely provided concrete ways to do research assignments and gave grades without providing a written or verbal account on how the grades were determined. The instructor designed a Term Paper Guidelines Sheet (Appendix B-AEQ issue webpage) based on students' concerns that provided specific instructions on how to write their assignments. For example, students were taught how to apply primary and secondary sources, cite these sources in their work, and when to quote, paraphrase, and reference research material. An interactive learning environment was established because students were given the opportunity to make comments and ask questions about their work. The American Psychological Association (APA) (1997) finds that interactive instruction helps motivate students to set their own learning goals as they develop individual ways of understanding subject matter.

When the research papers were returned, several students were upset with their grades. The instructor responded proactively to students' concerns on an individual basis by explaining how each score was determined by the grading criteria listed in the term paper guidelines. The instructor also responded to each student's comments and questions by using the guidelines to show how each section of the paper was scored based on organization, development, accuracy, and referencing. Furthermore, feedback enabled students to recognize their strengths in writing, and suggestions were given as to how they might improve writing competencies for current and future classes. The instructor observed that these teacher-student discussions motivated some of these students to actively participate and contribute their ideas during class, thus minimizing conflicts. Ali & Gracey (2013) find that when teachers listen empathetically and react positively to student concerns, "mutually respectful interactions" occur, leading to positive teacher-student relationships in an interactive setting.

End-of-Term Surveys

After the semester ended, this instructor created two surveys that may be helpful for instructors who want to monitor the pedagogical and behavioral outcomes of the courses they teach. The surveys' results provide empirical evidence of how students perceive the quality of their teachers' instruction and help instructors to self-evaluate their pedagogical practices. The Classroom Management Survey (Appendix C-AEQ issue webpage) for students is voluntary, anonymous, and confidential. Students use the Likert Rating Scale to evaluate how well the instructor taught course content, provided guidance for test and research assignments, and enforced classroom

behavioral standards. The Instructor Management Survey (Appendix D-AEQ issue webpage) helps teachers rate themselves on the effectiveness of their instruction of course material, their explanation of the exam and term paper assignment, and enforcement of the classroom behavior code.

These two surveys may benefit both the student and the teacher to evaluate classroom learning. For example, both surveys ask the respondents to determine how effectively students were "encouraged to participate during instruction." Also, the surveys inform both student and teacher to what extent behavioral rules were enforced, such as "not texting." Students' responses to the survey statements enable them to apply their self-reflection skills to assess the progress of their academic and behavioral competencies. Zimmerman (2008) finds that students who reflect on their classroom experiences become more self-directed, motivating them to take greater responsibility for their own learning. The two surveys also apply Tzu's principles of knowledge, assessment, adaptation and leadership, helping instructors to gain insights into the quality of their teaching. Instructors can compare their own evaluations of how well they enforced the classroom behavioral standards as opposed to the students' evaluations. McAlpine & Weston (2002) find that when instructors evaluate their teaching methods, they begin to challenge their own assumptions regarding the relative strengths and weaknesses of their instruction. The authors also state that assessment helps instructors to know which teaching practices are working and when it is necessary to develop new ones. Perhaps this is why Sullivan & Rosin (2008) propose that the valuable self-reflection process should be part of this century's educational agenda for faculty training in higher learning institutions.

Conclusion

Teachers are facing increasing challenges when teaching students from diverse backgrounds with different academic skills, learning styles, and beliefs. In order to meet these challenges, instructors should continue to take the leadership steps necessary not only to gain the knowledge of their academic areas, but also in classroom pedagogy; know how to assess students' academic skills and enforce behavioral standards; and know how to adapt curriculum and initiate pedagogical changes when needed. Thus, the combination of Tzu's four principles provide instructors with opportunities that may minimize or prevent teacher-student conflicts by enabling students to become actively involved in the learning process.

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APPENDIX A
Worksheet Exercises

Respond to the following classroom situation:
As a teacher of young children, you now have a better understanding from the previous lesson of the importance of behavioral standards and practices. However, there is additional knowledge on behavioral concepts that are crucial towards gaining expertise in the area of early childhood teaching.

Answer the following questions:
1) What does Piaget mean by the following stages of Cognitive development
- Sensorimeter Stage
- Preoperational Stage
- Concrete Operations Stage
- Formal Operation Stage

2) How can the ideas of Piaget be applied to providing age appropriate activities for children on   pp. 190/192?

3) How do the following ideas of Piaget impact classroom instruction? (pp. 29-31).
- Assimilation
- Accommodation
- Equilibrium
- Disequilibrium
- Equilibration

APPENDIX B
TERM PAPER GUIDELINES

1. Select 2 psychologists.

2. Describe at least two significant ideas that they have stated. (1 page for each
psychologist).   Cite references and restrict quoting.   Paraphrase your
findings.   Aligned with course objectives 1-10, goals 1-4, and NYSSTEP A-1.

3. Each psychologist or theorist should be based on primary or secondary
sources and should be cited according to APA style.   Aligned with course
objectives 1-10, goals 1-4, and NYSSTEP D.

4. In your own words compare the differences between the 2 psychologists or
theorists you   selected (1 page). Aligned with course objectives 1-   10,
goals 1-4, and NYSSTEP A-1.

5. In your own words explain why you agree or disagree with each psychologist   or
theorist and   how their ideas impact your future career (2 pages).   Aligned   with
course objectives 1-10, goals 1-4, and NYSSTEP A-1.

6. Write the Reference and Bibliography sheet.
Grading Criteria
- Organization of ideas
- Development of ideas
- Content accuracy
- APA formatting

Grading Scale

A+=97-100   B+=87-89   C+=77-79   D+=67-69   F=0-59
A   93-96   B   83-86   C   73-76   D+63-65
A-   90-92   B-   80-82   C-   70-72   D- 60-62

APPENDIX C
Classroom Management Survey Form
Based on our discussion of your exams and writing assignments, I am requesting that you answer both sections of this evaluation form. These Likert-based questions can help our faculty know more about the effectiveness of our teaching practices as we continue to seek to provide the highest levels of quality instruction possible. Your participation is voluntary, anonymous and confidential and will not affect your final grade.

LIKERT RATING SCALE   SD, D, U, SA (SD-Strongly Disagree=1, D-Disagree-2, U-Undecided-3,   A-Agree-4, SA=Strongly Agree-5

Classroom Instruction

1. I responded well when the instructor's lessons were well prepared.
    SD   D   U   A   SA
2. I responded well when the instructor spoke in a professional manner.
    SD   D   U   A   SA
3. I responded well when the instructor respected my questions.
    SD   D   U   A   SA
4. I responded well when the instructor respected my comments.
    SD   D   U   A   SA
5. I responded well when the instructor encouraged me to participate.
    SD   D   U   A   SA

Exam

6. I responded well when the instructor explained how to use the text for test preparation.
    SD   D   U   A   SA
7. I responded well when the instructor explained how use the worksheets for test preparation.
    SD   D   U   A   SA
8. I responded well when the instructor explained how to answer multiple choice questions on tests.
    SD   D   U   A   SA
9. I responded well when the instructor explained how to write essay questions on tests.
    SD   D   U   A   SA
10. I responded well when the instructor addressed my concerns before taking tests.
    SD   D   U   A   SA

Research Paper

11. I responded well when the instructor explained how to write the research paper.
    SD   D   U   A   SA
12. I responded well when the instructor explained how to organize the research paper.
    SD   D   U   A   SA
13. I responded well when the instructor explained how to develop ideas for the research paper.
    SD   D   U   A   SA
14. I responded well when the instructor explained how to apply source material for the research paper
    SD   D   U   A   SA
15. I responded well when the instructor explained how to review the research paper before submiss

Behavior Code

16. The instructor enforced the rule of students not speaking out of turn during instruction.
    SD   D   U   A   SA
17. The instructor enforced the rule of students not speaking to others during instruction.
    SD   D   U   A   SA
18. The instructor enforced the rule of students not speaking rudely during instruction.
    SD   D   U   A   SA
19. The instructor enforced the rule of students not doing other work during instruction.
    SD   D   U   A   SA
20. The instructor enforced the rule of students not using cell phones during instruction.
    SD   D   U   A   SA
21. The instructor enforced the rule of students not texting during instruction.
    SD   D   U   A   SA
22. The instructor enforced the rule of students attending class regularly.
    SD   D   U   A   SA
23. The instructor enforced the rule of students not leaving the classroom before the session is over.
    SD   D   U   A   SA
24. The instructor enforced the rule of students not arriving late to class.
    SD   D   U   A   SA
25. The instructor enforced the rule of students not cheating during tests.
    SD   D   U   A   SA

LIKERT RATING SCALE
SD, D, U, SA (SD-Strongly Disagree=1, D-Disagree-2,
U-Undecided-3, A-Agree-4, SA=Strongly Agree-5

Adapting Instruction

1. Students responded well when I adjusted the ways to present my lessons.
         SD   D   U   A   SA
2. Students responded well when I adjusted the ways to address them.
         SD   D   U   A   SA
3. Students responded well when I adjusted the ways to react to their questions.
         SD   D   U   A   SA
4. Students responded well when I adjusted the ways to react to their comments.
         SD   D   U   A   SA
5. Students responded well when I adjusted the ways to encourage their participation.
         SD   D   U   A   SA

Assessment

A. Exam

6. Students responded well when I explained the ways to use the textbook for test preparation.
         SD   D   U   A   SA
7. Students responded well when I explained the ways to use the worksheets for test preparation.
         SD   D   U   A   SA
8. Students responded well when I explained the ways to answer multiple choice questions on tests.
         SD   D   U   A   SA
9. Students responded well when I explained the ways to write essay questions on tests.
         SD   D   U   A   SA
10. Students responded well when I addressed their concerns before taking tests.
         SD   D   U   A   SA

B. Research Paper

11. Students responded well when I explained how to improve their writing for the research paper.
         SD   D   U   A   SA
12. Students responded well when I explained how to improve their organization for the research pa
         SD   D   U   A   SA
13. Students responded well when I explained how to develop their ideas for the research paper.
         SD   D   U   A   SA
14. Students responded well when I explained how to apply source material for the research paper.
         SD   D   U   A   SA
15. Students responded well when I explained how to review their research papers before submissic

Leadership

16. I enforced the rule of students not speaking out of turn during instruction.
         SD   D   U   A   SA
17. I enforced the rule of students not speaking to others during instruction.
         SD   D   U   A   SA
18. I enforced the rule of students not speaking rudely during instruction.
         SD   D   U   A   SA
19. I enforced I the rule of students not doing other work during instruction.
         SD   D   U   A   SA
20. I enforced the rule of students not using cell phones during instruction.
         SD   D   U   A   SA
21. I enforced the rule of students not texting during instruction.
         SD   D   U   A   SA
22. I enforced the rule of students attending class regularly.
         SD   D   U   A   SA
23. I enforced the rule of students not leaving the classroom before the session is over.
         SD   D   U   A   SA
24. I enforced the rule of students not arriving late to class.
         SD   D   U   A   SA
25. I enforced the rule of students not cheating on tests.
         SD   D   U   A   SA