
What's Wrong? Maybe Nothing

Conflict, Democracy, and Doing Good Work

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Abstract

Conflict is often a reality that most try to avoid. For many, it is a sign that something is wrong, that a mis-step has been made. In this article we consider an alternative view of conflict, noting that, in fact, the presence of conflict may be a sign that all is well. Using the philosophical work of Adam Phillips, Chantal Mouffe, and others we consider conflict as an essential process in both internal and external democracies. We close with a specific review of the ways conflict surfaces and can be navigated in the arts, software engineering and education, arguing that without conflict, we stifle creativity, learning, and democracy.

Introduction

Like many, I grew up avoiding conflict. It was not that I was unaware of conflict, but conflict was something that 'felt bad', something that symbolized that something was wrong. For instance, as part of this 'avoidance', our family did not express strong emotions, especial-

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ly emotions of anger, frustration, insecurity, hurt, or passionate disagreement. We did not sit around the kitchen table debating politics. Instead, we tended to acquiesce, holding any deeply held opinions to ourselves so as not to ‘upset the apple cart’. This ‘holding in’ covered all emotions, not just those that we associated with problems (i.e., anger or hurt). We were not a hugging or a crying family. In fact, the first time I ever remember someone hugging someone else in my family was when I brought my soon-to-be-partner home to meet my parents. She hugged everyone in the room (obviously, her family did not get the memo), leaving all of us in shock. What had just happened? Who was this alien who chose not to bottle up what she thought and felt?

Conflict is an interesting phenomenon, one that is feared (e.g., the Korean conflict of the 1950s), one that is shunned (e.g., I strongly disagree, but I don’t want to make her feel bad), and one that is a sign that something is amiss (e.g., what is wrong with you or what happened to you?). And, yet, it may be that conflict provides a marker for being fully human, a sign not only of engagement, but of democratic interaction. It might be that when we do not get along, at least in some fashion, we may be expressing equity in a fundamental sense. In this article, we will explore the role of conflict in democratic relations. In particular, we will consider the role of conflict in the fields of software engineering, the arts, and education. We begin with an overview of conflict, and its theoretical connection with democracy.

Conflict and Democracy

As we begin to think about conflict it is important to define our terms. For the purposes of this article, we will stick to a fairly basic definition of conflict. Words like disagreement, difference, and opposition come to mind. There are a couple of ways that we normally think about conflict. First, we may consider it as a verb. Conflict: “to come into collision or disagreement; be contradictory, at variance, or in opposition; clash. To fight or contend; do battle” (Dictionary.com). We may also think of conflict as a noun. Conflict: “A fight, battle, or struggle, especially a prolonged struggle; strife. Controversy; quarrel. Discord of action, feeling, or effect; antagonism or opposition, as of interests or principles; collision” (Dictionary.com).

For our purposes, we will follow this broad definition: conflict is centered in disagreement or difference of opinion, and may be characterized as a fight, battle or struggle. We will center conflict in ideas, opinions or viewpoints that are at odds. Yet, we do not mean to define conflict as only being at odds *with others*. Conflict may also mani-

fest internally; i.e., ‘I am conflicted about this issue’ or ‘I am presently battling against my own feelings of jealousy’. As we consider conflict, we will work under the assumption that conflict is centered, or stems from, a difference of opinion, belief, or viewpoint that is held strongly enough to create tension; either interpersonally or intrapersonally.

In her classic work, *Deliberative Democracy or Agonistic Pluralism*, Chantal Mouffe (1999) delineates between what she terms antagonistic conflict and agonistic conflict. Citing Seyla Benhabib, Mouffe contends that deliberative democracy is shortsighted. Benhabib argues that deliberative democracy is centered on three features: 1. “Participation in such deliberation is governed by the norms of equality and symmetry; all have the same chance to initiate speech acts, to question, interrogate, and to open debate”; 2. “All have the right to question”, and; 3. “All have the right to initiate reflexive arguments about the very rules of the discourse procedure and the way in which they are applied or carried out” (1996, p. 70). While this seems unproblematic on the surface, Mouffe goes on to argue that moral consensus (i.e., all having a voice and coming to a ‘democratic’ consensus) does not guarantee the equal and impartial aims inherent in deliberative *democracy*. In fact, the consensus may be to treat some unfairly, thus creating an undemocratic outcome. In addition, Mouffe argues that discursive practices are always imbued with power and that the framing of the discourse itself is often subject to the participant with the loudest, or most influential voice. Mouffe discounts “the very possibility of the notion of the “ideal speech situation” conceived as the asymptotic ideal of intersubjective communication free of constraints, where the participants arrive at consensus by means of rational argumentation” (1999, p. 751). Here, Mouffe asserts the fact that we privilege *rational argument* is already imbued with a certain perspective, or stance, on deliberation, one that is driven by a perspective with specific authority.

In an agonistic approach, Mouffe seeks not to eliminate power (which most would argue is impossible), but to mitigate its effects. Here, Mouffe works to differentiate between antagonism (i.e., conflict between enemies) and agonism (i.e., conflict between adversaries). Mouffe’s main aim is to seek to ‘domesticate hostility’, arguing that we work to “defuse the potential antagonism that exists in human relations that we can pose the fundamental question for democratic politics” (Mouffe 1999, p. 754). “Contrary to the model of ‘deliberative democracy,’ argues Mouffe,

The model of ‘agonistic pluralism’ [...] asserts that the prime task of democratic politics is not to eliminate passion nor to relegate them to

the private sphere in order to render rational consensus possible but to mobilise those passions toward the promotion of democratic designs (1999, pp. 755, 756).

In critique of Mouffe's call for an agonistic democratic framework, Eva Erman in her article, *What is wrong with agonistic pluralism?* (2009) argues that Mouffe sees conflict as inevitable (i.e., that "ethical conflicts are fundamentally irreconcilable" (2009, p. 1039)) and that deliberation itself is generative of conflict. In other words, Erman argues that deliberation, rather than simply a tool to calm conflict and, thus, build consensus, will just as likely create conflict and fuel antagonism. Our aim in this paper is not to determine what the 'best' modalities of conflict are, nor to determine the best ways of mitigating conflict. That would be a different, albeit worthy project. Our aim here is simply to normalize conflict as integral to democracy itself. Of course, acting to mitigate conflict, shifting it from antagonistic forms (resulting in wars, whether physical, emotional, or social, and bringing damage to ourselves and others) to more agonistic forms (focused in deliberative processes of negotiation and listening) is a worthy goal, but we will allow that delimitation to be tackled elsewhere (perhaps by Mouffe and Erman).

Yet, this discussion of how we view conflict is an important one. In her work, *Conflict is not abuse* (2016), Sarah Schulman seeks to better understand the ways that the hurt and anger involved in conflict can lead us to overstate its damage. In her introduction Schulman writes, "My thesis is that at many levels of human interaction there is the opportunity to conflate discomfort with threat, to mistake internal anxiety for exterior danger, and in turn to escalate rather than resolve" (2016, p. 17). According to Schulman there is a wide body of work focused on the violence of abuse. She does not discount that violence or abuse. The conflict involved in war or in domestic violence is tragic and real. Instead, Schulman seeks to differentiate between abuse and feelings of discomfort. Schulman argues, in fact, that the differences of opinion or viewpoints, or even criticisms of ourselves by others, can often create discomfort that we seek to mitigate by overstating harm. "In other words," argues Schulman,

because we won't change our stories to integrate other people's known *reasons* and illuminate their unknown ones, we cannot resolve Conflict in a way that is productive, equitable, and fair. This is why we (individuals, couples, cliques, families, communities, nations, peoples) often pretend, believe or claim that Conflict is, instead, Abuse and therefore deserves punishment. That the mere fact of the other person's difference is misrepresented as an assault that then justifies our cruelty and relinquishes our responsibility to change" (2016, pp. 20, 21).

Schulman's project is to better understand the difference between conflict and abuse, and to ferret out the propensity to conflate the two. In an extended quote, she articulates the vagaries of this process:

Sometimes involving the language of abuse is an avoidance of responsibility, just like speaking in metaphors. Like when people say, 'I feel like I've been raped,' to mean they are upset. In reality, what they feel is nothing like what they would feel if they'd been raped. It's a turn of phrase that means they don't like what is happening and don't know how to make it better. It's an overstatement of harm using Abuse tropes. And sometimes we are so insistent on our right to overstate that we do things that are not merited by the actual dimensions of the conflict. Sometimes, when we are upset, we pretend to convince ourselves that Conflict is actually not only Abuse, but a crime. Sometimes, we really do not want to face ourselves, our own participation, our own painful pasts, the facts of our own projections, distorted thinking, mental illness. (2016, p. 55)

This rather circuitous journey through the landscape of conflict brings us, now, to the premise of this article: that conflict, rather than a disruption, may actually be a sign that democracy is working efficiently and effectively. Adam Phillips, in his work *Equals*, aims to understand the overt, and more importantly, the hidden ways that inequality operates. In his preface Phillips posits, "If the best thing we do is look after each other, then the worst thing we do is pretend to look after each other when in fact we are doing something else" (2002, p. xi). In other words, when a counselor seems, in fact, to be focused on helping a client, might it be that they are also, or perhaps more fundamentally, helping themselves? One might ask, what is the nature of altruism? Is it aimed at helping others, or feeling better ourselves because we are the kind of person who helps others. In a similar way, Phillips raises the topic of conflict, asking us to consider that conflict, rather than serving as a seeming disruption, may actually be a sign that all is well.

Phillips takes time in his reflection to consider superiority, especially those superiorities 'in advance' that provide comfort, yet at the same time undermine multiple points of view. Specifically citing three professions as examples (medicine, religion, and law), Phillips raises the notion of experts and of the comfort we may derive from their inscrutable expertise. "Indeed these are the three professions," Phillips contends, "which assure a man that he will find himself in a position in which superiority over his interlocutor is guaranteed in advance" (2002, p. 7). This 'superiority in advance', means that there is at least one person 'in the room' that has the answers, that knows the truth, that understands the right path on which to move forward. Here, our

goal becomes to find the expert, to listen and to follow. And yet, here, referring to Mouffe's notion of deliberative democracy, Phillips raises a provocative possibility: "What is perhaps most interesting in Mouffe's formulation is the definition of the authoritarian as that which suppresses conflict. As though it is the very existence of conflict itself that certain versions of authority cannot bear" (2002, p. 11). On Phillips' view, the absence of conflict may be an indication of the absence of voice, of the superiority of some, of one, at the expense of the voices of many. In other words, Phillips asks, 'might conflict itself be a necessary component of democracy'? "Equality", Phillips asserts, "then is the legitimation, if not the celebration of conflict" (2002, p. 11). "Modern democracy's specificity", Phillips continues,

lies in the recognition and legitimation of conflict and the refusal to suppress it by imposing an authoritarian order. [...] And to value conflict—to prefer the openness of conflict to the closure of intimidation — necessitates some notion of equality. Conflict that is not between equals ceases to be conflict very quickly. (2002, p. 12)

Further, Phillips argues that "speaking becomes worth doing because it is conducive of conflict" (2002, p. 13). Here, conflict begins to take on a new persona. Rather than conflict serving as a marker of something negative, something that has gone awry, conflict serves as an emblem that democracy is, in fact, in operation. On Phillips' view, conflict means that an authoritarian regime, whether our own internal censorship of alternative perspectives, or the different perspectives of an *other*, is not shutting down deliberation. As Mouffe argues, this deliberation is, indeed, at the heart of democratic relations. And, as Erman contends, that very deliberation is fraught with conflict. While we may certainly seek to discern 'good' conflict from 'harmful' conflict, and, thus, how we might respond to conflict in helpful ways, our contention, here, is that instead of being caught off guard by conflict, we might be comforted by it. Rather than seeing conflict as a signal that something is wrong, conflict might actually serve as a marker that things, instead, are going quite well. "To have an appetite for association—of a political or psychic kind" Phillips continues,

is to have an appetite for, if not to actually seek out, fresh forms of conflict and to see conflict as the way we renew and revise our pleasures. Democracy, one could say, extends the repertoire of possible conflict. It fosters an unpredictability of feeling and desire. It makes people say, or people find themselves saying, all sorts of things to each other. (2002, p. 21)

Finally, Phillips argues that conflict, which is inherent to democracy, and that is suppressed in authoritarian regimes, is not only external. He highlights the “very real difficulty everyone finds in sustaining and making known an internal democracy. People literally shut themselves up in their speaking out; speech is riddled with no-go areas; internal and external exchange, as fantasy and as practicality, is fraught with resistance” (2002, p. 23). Our premise in this review is to argue that conflict, both interpersonal and intrapersonal, at least on some level, should bring comfort, a sense that things are quite well, and that a lack of conflict may indicate an external or internal disregard, or even shutting up, of our or another’s voice.

With this perspective, we would now like to turn to the ways that conflict may play out in the worlds of software development, the arts, and education. Here, we ask several questions: How does conflict show up interpersonally? How does conflict operate intrapersonally? How might conflict aid or hurt the work of learning, developing, and creating? How might we reimagine conflict as a productive part of these industries? How might we create spaces that allow for such ‘productive’ conflict? We turn first to the world of software engineering.

Case Studies

Conflict in Software Engineering

Software development isn’t magic. It also isn’t usually rocket science, unless you program for NASA, and then it very much is. Software development is, at its core, about solving one problem after another, after another, after another. Software development is also, despite what certain pockets of popular culture might have you believe, not a solo endeavor, but instead is often highly collaborative, in a cross-functional manner, stitching together engineering with visual design and user experience to create a cohesive product. Great software is built by teams, not individuals. None of what I’ve outlined here is unique to software. “Solving problems as an interdisciplinary team” is a good descriptor for the work involved at many professions or projects. For me, there are three factors that put software development into a unique class or subset of work:

1. The sheer number of problems to solve at any given moment;
2. The potential complexity of each problem and its connection to a large and vastly unpredictable system, and;
3. The high number of potential solutions to each problem.

I believe that these factors create unique problem-solving scenarios and therefore unique conflict both within and between the humans involved. I would like to explore the role of conflict in software development by examining a common cautionary tale that exists within the domain, namely the concept known as “bike-shedding” or the “bikeshed effect.”

Before we get started, however, I want to surface a couple assumptions. First, is the assumption that all software projects have limited time and resources, and thus require us to make tradeoffs when it comes to their design and implementation. So, whilst theoretically a project with unlimited time and resources could endlessly perfect every piece of its architecture, I don’t find exploring that avenue to be worthwhile since it does not reflect the reality that all human endeavors have constraints imposed upon them, either internally or externally.

Second, and alluded to in an earlier paragraph, is the assumption that all software projects are built by a team of interdisciplinary members with different backgrounds and strengths. Again, I believe this to be a vastly more interesting and more realistic perspective of investigation. Holding to these two assumptions, let us first explore the “bikeshed effect.”

The Bikeshed Effect

Why should I care what color the bikeshed is? The really, really short answer is that you should not. The somewhat longer answer is that just because you are capable of building a bikeshed does not mean you should stop others from building one just because you do not like the color they plan to paint it. This is a metaphor indicating that you need not argue about every little feature just because you know enough to do so. Some people have commented that the amount of noise generated by a change is inversely proportional to the complexity of the change. (Kamp, entry 15:12, 2022)

The term “bike-shedding” or the “bikeshed effect” was derived from a now infamous email sent in 1999 to the freeBSD operating system mailing group from, then contributor, Paol-Henning Kamp (2022). The exact context of the email is unimportant, but suffice it to say that Kamp used the metaphor in response to what he felt was disingenuous and unproductive debate within the community. Since then the term has become ubiquitous within (and, to a certain degree, without) the world of software development. In actuality, the term dates all the way back to the late 1950s, to a publication by British naval historian Cyril Northcote Parkinson called “Parkinson’s Law.”

The “law of triviality”, as Parkinson calls it, states that “the time spent on any item of the agenda will be in inverse proportion to the

sum [of money] involved” (1957, p. 11). Parkinson goes on to draw out the (now slightly dated) example of a committee charged with planning the construction of a multi-million-dollar nuclear plant. When it comes time to approve the proposal for the plant the committee is overwhelmed by the enormity of the price tag and the complexity therein. No one knows where to begin and thus no one knows how to contribute—i.e., how to leave their mark on the project. So instead the group bickers endlessly about the plans for an employee bikeshed. They argue about the materials that should be used and even whether there should be a bikeshed at all. The cost (and therefore potential cost savings) of the bikeshed is tens of thousands times smaller than the plant itself and yet it is where the committee finds itself focusing all of its finite time and energy.

The “law of triviality” or the “bikeshed effect” has become a sort of cautionary tale in the world of software development, one that I believe speaks to both the types of conflicts that present themselves, as well as the aspirational methodologies for resolving said conflicts within this domain. For me, there are two main lessons embedded within the bikeshed metaphor. The first is a lesson about prioritizing the *right* conflicts.

The task of interfacing with any reasonably complex system brings with it potential to become focused on the wrong things. What are the wrong things? The answer will change depending on the project. Put simply, the wrong things are whatever things the team decides aren’t worth their time, usually because the potential improvement that could be realized by worrying about such things is lower than that of other things. The outcome isn’t worth the effort. And this is where we begin to see that avoiding the “bikeshed effect” is more art than science. It isn’t an algorithm we apply once at the beginning of a project or a list of rules we write down in stone. Instead it becomes a day-to-day (even moment-to-moment) check in with ourselves and our team to decide if the thing we are currently arguing about has enough potential gain to warrant ongoing debate.

The second lesson of “bike-shedding” concerns collaboration and ego. Paol-Henning Kamp states “just because you are capable of building a bikeshed does not mean you should stop others from building one just because you do not like the color they plan to paint it” (entry 15:12, 2022). In many debates, there is often a selfish temptation to nitpick small “problems” within a counterpart’s argument. These small details, like the *color* of a bike-shed, are not crucial to the underpinnings of the argument, but instead boil down to semantics and personal opinions. We tug at these threads, however, because they feed our egos. They provide us with an opportunity to halt one’s progress, and

therefore wield power over that person, becoming a blocker to their progress.

This sounds strikingly similar to the first lesson we learned, but I see a subtle difference. The first lesson is about *what* we choose to argue about, while the second is about *how* we have that argument. Even if we decide as a team to not prioritize the construction of a bike-shed, there will be countless other opportunities for us to argue very poorly about whatever it is we *do* decide to build. *What* and *how* we argue is something that upon which is always worth reflecting.

So how *do* we determine what to choose, where to put the energies of the team? We debate! We discuss! We lean on different expertise within the team to make an educated assessment about which path to take. And there are never just two paths. There are infinitely branching paths in all directions and tradeoffs to make by choosing one over another. It is only through collaboration, through the clashing of opinions and ideas that we find our way through. And after all of this debate and assessment and planning we often get it wrong anyway! And that's okay. Part of any worthwhile endeavor is making mistakes. In fact, I believe it is a requirement for true learning since we learn vastly more when things do not go as we expect.

Software development is a highly collaborative effort to wrangle complexity and solve the *right* problems in the *right* ways. And while the code is the ultimate by-product of this collaboration, the important work lies in the *why* and the *how*. It can be tempting at times to focus on problems that don't need solving. We avoid this temptation by leaning on our team, by debating and discussing, by embracing differences of opinion, by engaging in *conflict*, and by growing as a team when we inevitably get it wrong. And, I would argue, without that collaborative, deliberative, and iterative conflict, our final product will be less elegant, less maintainable, and less functioning. In other words, if conflict is not a part of the engineering process, we should worry.

Conflict in the Arts

Talking about *art-making* in general is kind of like talking about language in general. Is there really any one thing that can be said about every piece of art, ever? Probably not. Much like language and games, art is likely connected by what Ludwig Wittgenstein would call "family resemblances:" no one feature is shared by all members, but when seen as a group it is clear that there are things in common (Wittgenstein 2009).

Generally, however, art is a realm where more is permissible

than in life. You can pretend to kill someone on a stage, or say something rude, or smash your guitar. It's kind of like a theoretical testing ground. And it's a place that often encourages breaking rules or pushing boundaries. Conversation is similar. It is a theoretical testing ground where we can try out ideas and get feedback from our peers.

Artists have all kinds of different aims as people, so I will only share my own here. I make art to learn more about the mediums I am working with, myself, others, and the world around me. I have a lot of questions and art is one way to explore answers. But in this realm, I feel there is the freedom to explore. Conversation often feels like a place where everyone is supposed to know what they're talking about already.

What I am arguing here is that part of a feeling of safety comes from a collective understanding of the medium itself. Art, generally speaking, is understood to be a space of exploration. Conversation, however, seems to be a place for already knowing everything. If we could somehow change our perspective and start to see conversing as a dynamic system of exploration, learning about the medium we are working with (language), ourselves, others and the world around us, I think we would generally feel more safe and greater freedom to explore a wider range of topics without amygdala response.

A feeling of safety also comes from building dynamic relationships with those who will be your interlocutors. This isn't so much a consideration specific to art, but the realization did come to me through art-making (specifically theater making) practices. While I don't think many artists value relationship building as highly as they could, the theater and dance traditions have a rich history of valuing time spent together as a part of the process of making work together. To discuss, I would like to turn to a few personal stories.

I am a musician by trade. A number of years ago I started a theater company called Cheat Day with three other artists. Allison Burke is a choreographer and dancer, Gavin Reub is a director and actor, and Erin Bednarz is a dramaturg, actor and sound designer. We didn't know each other very well when we first started working together. I had procured a grant and essentially hired Allison, Gavin and Erin for a long-term project. This project grew into deep friendships, fulfilling artistic partnerships, and a commitment to each other personally and professionally long term.

To begin the project, we decided to meet weekly and get to know each other. I can't remember whose idea this was, but it ended up being a brilliant one. Each week we brought in something that was inspiring us to share with the others. We also met at a different member's house and always made dinner together to start things off. We didn't talk

about the project, logistics, money, or promotion for six whole months. We just shared what we were excited about, made dinner, talked, and inhabited each other's worlds.

Many years later I worked as a manager at a recording studio. I remember speaking with one of the head engineers who was often very brusque, bordering on disrespectful. He told me that he admired relationships where people could be brutally honest with one another. We were speaking primarily about his treatment of our interns and 'lower-level' staff members, which I felt was not working well for them. He obviously did not understand the power dynamic that was at play in these interactions, but there was something else he missed. A relationship that allows brutal honesty needs a sturdy foundation. That foundation is built in time spent together, in the trust and understanding that is formed inside of that time. I too appreciate it when I can be honest with those I love, but I also understand the foundation that that kind of interaction needs.

Cheat Day started by building time spent together, which in turn, built trust and understanding. We ate together, went to see shows together, attended each other's performances, got coffee, talked about our lives, helped each other move, ran errands together, and many years later we were able to say hard things to each other and survive it. So how do you get to know someone? How do you build a strong foundation of trust, trust that allows for the conflict that is inevitable in the creative process? Here are seven lessons from the art world that can be applied to any field.

First, certain principles have to be adhered to by all involved. No one you work with can be a pathological liar, for instance. You won't get accurate information from this individual, which means you will have a much harder time determining what is going on and how to move forward. This means you will waste more time getting from point A to B than if you worked with someone who told the truth more often. There are many things like this that should be considered up front. So, the first step should be taking some time to consider what qualities need to be present in order to work with someone effectively. Most everyone will have biases about things that are not, in fact, important, so it is essential to heavily consider your own biases during this stage. In this step you are essentially asking yourself "who should I work with and why?"

Second, you should set aside time for relationship building as a part of the work you do. Working out what percentage of time should be devoted to this can be determined on a case by case basis. But that it *should* be a priority seems obvious.

Third, during "relationship building" time you should do the wid-

est variety of activities possible. The reason for this is that we get to know each other differently in different circumstances. We all contain multitudes, and to get to know many aspects of a person (especially somewhat quickly) it is important to vary the activities to widen your scope of who someone is. It is important to see each other in all kinds of different environments.

Fourth is more of a precaution: don't try to manufacture intimacy or strong relationships. Let strong, intimate relationships develop organically over time. Just vary the activities, keep them fun and engaging, and people will naturally form their own attachments. Trying to manufacture intimacy is pretty much always a recipe for disaster. Prioritizing time to build relationships organically is a very different practice.

Fifth, some activities should be extremely easy and some should be more challenging. You can interpret this however you like, and it will be different depending on your field. The easy activities should be "total comfort zone" and the challenging activities should push slightly beyond.

Sixth, whatever your work is, whatever field you are in, make sure you are doing things to build relationships that are novel for your team. No one wants to respond to an ice breaker for the 1000th time. Think of the realm of relationship building like any other realm. Do research, look at what others are doing (especially those outside of your field), think about what your team needs, experiment, practice on your own, and constantly be innovating in this realm. Everything is a skill and building relationships is no exception.

Seventh is more of a value statement. The goal is to actually build friendships. This is not just a show of how friendly your company is. Because friendship is the goal, I would recommend not making relationship building work mandatory. I would also suggest offering many different paths for the work that your employees can choose and talking with your employees about their ideas and incorporating them. This shouldn't feel like work. A collaborative optional approach is probably going to be more effective.

I believe that everything is a skill, friendship being no different. It follows, then, that we could approach friendship much like other things we work on (e.g. playing the piano). We can research, practice, experiment, and take notes to get better at one of life's most important and meaningful tasks. The above relationship building practices are often built into theater and dance traditions because the practitioners have to be very connected to each other physically and emotionally when they perform. What I am arguing is that we all could benefit from practicing our relationships with this much attention to detail.

In his work *Philosophical Investigations* Ludwig Wittgenstein de-

veloped the idea of the language game. Essentially, Wittgenstein argued that a word, or even a sentence, has meaning only as a result of the “game” being played (i.e. the way language is being used in a context) (Wittgenstein, 2001). Each person on earth has a slightly different way of using and understanding language. Part of getting to know someone is getting to know their particular language game, the way they use words to express internal processes. Conversing with someone we don’t know is like exploring a foreign land. Understanding someone’s language games means more efficient communication and less misunderstanding. This understanding comes directly from relationship building practices. And understanding someone’s language game is just one of many benefits of this kind of practice.

All of this is fundamentally about productive conflict. When we truly grapple with our own finitude, our own smallness, it is obvious that we need the ideas of others in our lives. We want to find the best idea, and it simply doesn’t matter where it comes from. A great idea changes lives for the better. The need to be the one who creates the good idea is about something else.

Conflict is tricky because our physiology is constantly on the lookout for danger. Our feelings sometimes don’t accurately portray the situation. In the case of amygdala hijack, understanding this about ourselves is sometimes not enough. We need to think about how to place ourselves and our interlocutors in situations that feel safe and supportive. This, I believe, will mean not only that we can deal productively *with* conflict, but that we can, potentially, have even more contentious debates about even more contentious issues. The safer we feel - the more we know that someone will take care of us regardless of whether we have a bad idea or two - the more we will share and grow and better our whole team.

Conflict is difficult for us to process physiologically. Because of this we need to think about ways to help each other feel safe when dealing with contentious topics. One way to do this is to see conversation as a creative exploration, instead of a dogmatic expression of who we fundamentally are. It is a process of uncovering understanding together. Another way of creating safety is prioritizing relationship building in whatever work we do. We can build relationships using practices that are as well studied as our vocations.

Conflict in Education

A well-documented conundrum in higher education involves course evaluations. These evaluations are often part of the instructor evalua-

tion and promotion process, but can be problematic, at least from the view of faculty. The crux; if students enjoy your course, 'learn' from the materials, and like you as an instructor, you will typically receive high marks. But, if the material is difficult, if you push students out of their comfort zones, stretching them a bit beyond their current capabilities, you will likely hear about it in your evaluations. Yet, Vygotsky, in his theory Zone of Proximal Development (1978) posits that it is exactly that area of discomfort, that place of stretching one just beyond their comfort zone, that is foundational to all growth.

At the heart of education, whether in P-12 or at the college and university level is this notion of cognitive dissonance. To learn something new, to move to a new theory of understanding, is unsettling. Comfort, at least to some degree, is centered in predictability, perhaps even in carefully crafted identities around certain learnings. Imre Lakatos, in his article *Falsification and the methodology of scientific research programmes* (1999), argues that scientists, themselves, struggle with new information, and certainly new theories. Lakatos' research finds that in contrast to what one might expect, scientists do not shift from one theory to another easily. In fact, even when there is strong evidence, Lakatos argues that scientists hold to prior theories, resisting new ones. For example, when Copernicus presented evidence that the earth actually revolves around the sun instead of the long-held alternative belief, he was branded a heretic. Leaving old theories, taking on new ones, is often uncomfortable. Growth often means leaving something behind. That inner conflict can be uncomfortable and, depending on the topic, can be unmooring. New learning can push on political, religious, or even identity beliefs, requiring us to shift our perspectives.

In addition, according to Hans-Georg Gadamer (1996), coming to new understanding often means that our prior understanding was lacking, or perhaps wrong. Such conflict is unsettling, but also foundational to new learning. If we want to stick with our foreknowledge, as Gadamer argues, then growth is impossible. If we want to learn, then conflict is inevitable.

Conflict shows up in education in at least one more foundational way. Not only might there be internal conflict as we deconstruct and reconstruct our own internal understandings, but as John Dewey argues, all learning is social (1897). In other words, we never learn in isolation. We learn with others and from others. That means that in any P-12 or university classroom, there is a range of perspectives, approaches, and aptitudes. Humans are unique, and we bring those idiosyncrasies to all of our endeavors, including learning. Group work can often be contentious, and those conflicts can range from concerns

that not all are pulling their weight, to differences of opinions on the content (e.g., what did lead us to World War II?). Yet, one might argue that those interpersonal conflicts provide the fulcrum through which learning is enacted. When our neighbor pushes against our current understanding, those interactions provide concrete influences that allow us to examine our own understandings, perhaps moving to new perspectives.

In the end, I would argue that without conflict, little learning and growth can take place. It is that intrapersonal dissonance, often surfaced by interpersonal interactions, which allows me to examine past understandings and to consider new. Returning to our working definition, conflict is centered in disagreement or difference of opinion, and may be characterized as a fight, battle or struggle. In my experience, that struggle is a clear component of education, specifically centered in learning and growth. Conflict, rather than something we should try to mitigate or avoid in schools, might be the very thing that allows students to grow, imagining new understandings of the world around them, bringing new solutions to perennial problems.

Conclusion

Adam Phillips allows us to consider conflict, certainly as something that may be uncomfortable, but also something that is at the heart of democratic relations. He posits that it is, “as though it is the very existence of conflict itself that certain versions of authority cannot bear” (2002, p. 11). He is not disparaging authority or leadership, but instead pointing out the undemocratic work that some do to ‘shut up’ those around them, or that we often do to ‘shut up’ ourselves. It seems that conflict is at the heart of good software engineering, allowing teams to move from ‘bikeshedding’ to productive work. It is the work of building relational trust in the arts that allows conflict to fuel creative endeavors, spreading vision across a team, even a team that doesn’t see eye to eye. And, it is conflict, internal and external that is foundational to all learning, to all growth.

Our premise in this paper is not aimed at settling world wars, or positing the definitive answers that will allow us to get along. Instead, simply put, our contention, gently stated, is that when we disagree, when we strongly debate, when we are uncomfortable, perhaps we might celebrate, instead of set off alarm bells. Democracy is messy, building anything with others is contentious, learning stretches us, creating with others means building communities that can handle the process. Perhaps it’s time to embrace the ruptures, internal and exter-

nal, noting that in those spaces, democracy is most alive and growth is most possible. What's wrong when we fight? Perhaps nothing. It's worth considering.

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