Putting Yourself in Their Shoes: The Analysis of Real-World Disputes Through Group Field Projects

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ABSTRACT
This article explains the development and use of group field projects to analyze real-world public policy disputes in a course on conflict management. In the process of learning about the evolution of disputes, their management, and techniques for resolving them, students are assigned to groups and required to analyze a local public dispute involving multiple parties. Using Carpenter and Kennedy's (2001) book, Managing Public Disputes, and other course material, students provide a detailed analysis of the conflict's history, identify stakeholders, and learn about the positions and interests of the disputants. After extensive analysis, students recommend a conflict management program for the dispute. During the semester, this project provides a capstone of sorts to the MPA program. Students get a firsthand look at the complexity of policy disputes, how individuals and groups approach public problems, and why some policy solutions lead to successes and failures.

INTRODUCTION

Courses on conflict management, alternative dispute resolution, and negotiation techniques are being taught around the world in programs that focus on peace studies, and in other traditional academic disciplines such as communications and psychology. More-applied courses on managing conflict are commonly taught in professional degree programs such as law, business, and public administration. Most courses employ a variety of traditional pedagogical techniques that use a combination of textbook reading, lectures, experts as guest speakers, and discussion of what we know from theory and research (Lewicki, 1986, 1997). However, research shows that learning is often enhanced when students work together to solve problems and teach each other (Bok, 2007). Courses on conflict resolution often provide student interaction by combining traditional pedagogy with the simulated practice of conflict resolution techniques. Most instructors then integrate experiential learning techniques such as case studies, role-play exercises (e.g., mock negotiations or mediations), and computer-assisted simulations that allow students to practice conflict management and resolution techniques (Lewicki, 1986, 2002; Saunders & Lewicki, 1995).

I found many of these techniques to be very beneficial for my teaching over the years. However, as I developed my course on conflict management in the public sector, it was difficult to find appropriate pedagogical materials that applied conflict management techniques in either a public or nonprofit setting. Most textbooks and simulations focus primarily on law or business disputes and, if policy-related, are geared to the perspective of future attorneys or business leaders. I had to look a little harder for public-management-related case studies, and often cobbled together appropriate cases from online conflict resolution Web sites such as Harvard Business School, the University of Washington's Electronic Hallway, and others. While my classes were generally effective, I wanted my students to learn more about how the real-world conflicts they might face as managers and policy-makers evolve and change. In short, I wanted them to learn by "putting themselves into the shoes of others."

This article is drawn from my experiences over the past seven years, at the University of Arizona, while teaching an MPA course titled "Conflict Management in the Public Sector." I discuss how I developed group field projects to supplement the more traditional pedagogical techniques that are commonly used in classes. It is a capstone-like project that exposes future public and nonprofit managers to regional, real-world disputes. The paper describes a bit about my course, how and why I developed the field projects, plus their goals and methodology. I end by discussing an example of a past project and the issues and problems that have come up since assigning this and other projects.

Course Background and Development

I have been teaching in the fields of dispute resolution and conflict management for about 10 years and my approach has evolved over time. My background and interest in conflict resolution come from my dissertation work, where I studied the implementation and impact of a court-annexed mediation on a local trial-court system. Over time, I learned more and more about conflict from seminars, training, and service work. I began teaching in the field at Roanoke College in 1999, with a senior capstone course on alternative dispute resolution that was designed for majors in political science, international relations, and criminal justice. This course used traditional methods of lecturing and negotiation/mediation simulations, but suffered a bit from the lack of real-world application and group work.

After three years at Roanoke, I moved to my current position at the University of Arizona. Here, I was asked to teach an existing MPA course on conflict resolution to improve the students' negotiation skills. Each year the course draws 15-20, mostly MPA students. It is broader in focus than the traditional courses on negotiation and alternative dispute resolution that are found in law and business schools. The course goal is to expose students to the nature of conflict, as well as to the skills and techniques of effective conflict management that are used in public and private organizations (e.g., mediation, arbitration, and "hybrids").

When I first prepared my course, I found reading material that focused broadly on dispute resolution and that also focused on business and law. I searched long and hard for material that might be applicable to the public and nonprofit sectors. Unfortunately, there was very little written for students of public administration and policy. After some searching, I was lucky to find Carpenter and Kennedy's (2001) book, *Managing Public Disputes,* which focuses on disputes with multiple parties (e.g., governments, community groups, nonprofits, and private companies). The book also offers a detailed process for analyzing existing disputes and building programs to manage them.

Two-thirds of the course focuses on theory and conflict resolution techniques. It begins with conflict theory, the evolution of disputes, and the differences between private and public disputes. It then covers practical techniques for resolving conflicts, which include litigation, negotiation, mediation, arbitration, and hybrids. Readings for the first two-thirds of the course includes the early chapters of Carpenter and Kennedy (2001), a very good law school text with a broad focus on dispute resolution (Goldberg, Sander, Rogers, & Cole, 2003), and the classic book, *Getting to Yes* (Fisher, Ury, & Patton, 1991). The latter third of the course focuses on Carpenter and Kennedy's (2001) process for analyzing public disputes, their method of designing and implementing a conflict management program, and the application of their process to the field study.

Because a semester is not very long, some things that might be taught in non-MPA courses on negotiation have to be left out when including a project like the field study described here. Surprisingly, I have been able to cover much of what I used to with lectures and readings. However, I reduced the amount of conflict theory that I formerly presented early in the class, and left out what once was a rather lengthy discussion of litigation and its process. Choosing what to leave out can be a tough call. Again, because only so much can be taught in a semester, I decided that, when teaching future public and nonprofit managers, the practice would be of more use to them than the theory.

Development of Field Projects

After teaching this course at University of Arizona for a few years, I started thinking more about the applicability of my course to the public and nonprofit sectors. Carpenter and Kennedy's (2001) method for analyzing public disputes got me thinking about how my students might be able to explore real-world conflict settings and learn by seeing how public disputes begin and evolve. It also could be a nice way to apply many of the concepts learned in the course. *Getting to Yes* teaches that, for political and economic reasons, the positions and interests of disputing parties vary, and often go unstated (Fisher, Ury & Patton, 1991). Exploring the interests behind the positions of those in disputes can sometimes provide areas of common ground. Carpenter and Kennedy (2001) note how public disputes sometimes have long histories and that they can spiral out of control if not addressed early in the process. Media reports on local conflicts are typically only the tip of the iceberg when it comes to the complexity of public disputes. Parties that seem to oppose each other may have similar interests, and parties that seem to agree may have conflicting interests. Each of these realities is commonly found in the disputes of governments and nonprofit agencies.

At the beginning of each semester, I assign groups of four to six students — depending upon the class size — and provide a handout describing the assignment. *(See Appendix.)* They are asked to identify, analyze, and build a conflict resolution process for an ongoing, local public dispute. Public disputes are defined by Carpenter and Kennedy (2001) as "controversies that affect members of the public beyond the primary negotiators" (p. 4). They may be between "communities and their decision makers, between factions in government, between organizations, and between organizations and the public" (p. 3). According to the book, public disputes have some of the following characteristics (pp. 4-11):

- *Complicated networks of interests* (i.e., where new parties may emerge, where parties have varying levels of expertise, different forms of power, a lack of continuing relationships, different decision-making procedures, and unequal accountability).
- *Procedures for resolution are not standardized* (i.e., no formal guidelines exist for resolution, [though] there is an influence of government rules and regulations).
- *A broad range of issues* (i.e., new issues may emerge, technical information may be important, and parties may have strongly held values).

Public disputes can involve a plan to widen a city street into a major highway, a downtown redevelopment project, a zoning dispute between neighborhoods and developers, or a proposal to declare land as a protected wilderness area.

The student groups identify conflicts that are of interest to them, and that are close enough to the university so that they might easily gain access to stakeholders. Students formally propose the subject of their projects early in the semester, in a one- to two-page document. I then see if it fits the criteria of a good field project and provide feedback. The project must be doable during a semester, and cannot create any potential harm to students or those studied.

Project Goals and Methods

Project Goals

After approval of the project, students spend the semester working together to analyze the dispute and tailor it to a conflict management program design. This is done using Part II of Carpenter and Kennedy's (2001) book, which provides details of how to analyze the conflict (chap. 4), how to design a strategy and set up a conflict management program (chap. 5), how to adopt procedures, educate parties, and develop options (chap. 6), and how to reach and carry out agreements (chap. 7). Because it would be a very tall order for students actually to help involved parties carry out the dispute management process, I only ask that they apply the contents of chapters 4 and 5 to their particular dispute, which requires an extensive analysis of the conflict and a program designed to manage it.

Project Methods

The predominant methods for the field project are, in part, based on chapters 4 and 5 of Carpenter and Kennedy (2001). Chapter 4 covers methods on how to analyze a public dispute. Students are asked to make a preliminary review of the conflict, to gather information about the dispute and its history, to record the information, and to assess it by using some tools provided in the chapter.

Students begin their research with secondary sources that include newspapers; public and government documents and reports; and essays, editorials or public positions taken by the disputing parties. From these sources, students learn the history of the conflict and the involved technical, political, social, and economic issues.

Other key sources of information are interviews with parties in the dispute and with others who may have additional information (e.g., journalists covering the dispute, public officials who have no direct interest in the dispute, and technical experts). Students contact outside parties by mail to explain the project, and to ask for their help in learning about the dispute. The letter includes information about the class, a description of the project, and requests an appointment for an interview. It also explains the nature of the interview questions, the length of the interview, how the information will be used, and the terms of confidentiality. Students ask questions designed to reveal the following: (a) the history of the conflict, (b) the stakeholders' role in the conflict, (c) what issues are important to them, (d) what they want and why they want it, and (e) other interested parties. Carpenter and Kennedy (2001) raise many of these questions, and also describe interview techniques (pp. 74-85).

Another source of data is direct observation. Some students identify events like public meetings, public hearings, or gatherings such as protests that they can attend and observe. If such a gathering is not "public" — by legal definition — then permission to attend is requested.

Because students are learning about active public disputes, I emphasize that the disputing parties are often emotionally involved. As a result, I ask that students do everything they can to remain neutral and to act as objective analysts. I discuss this point before they choose their projects, and ask them to be careful about disputes they might be involved in. When students have a personal stake in the dispute, I ask that they try a different topic, switch project groups, or take on another role within the group (e.g., analyzing secondary sources). I have learned from experience that their involvement could impact the analysis process or put them in a difficult ethical position of endangering their working relationship with others.

After gathering the information, students employ Carpenter and Kennedy's (2001) instruments to analyze the data (pp. 85-91). These include tables to help them organize the information by the following categories: (a) the disputants, (b) their issues, (c) their interests, (d) the importance of issues, (e) the sources of power and influence, (f) the positions/options for resolution, and (g) their interest in working with others. Students are then ready to write about the history, the involved parties, and their interests and positions.

Once this section of the paper is complete, students use the information to design a process to resolve or manage the dispute. For this, they use class material and the later chapters of Carpenter and Kennedy (2001). In chapter 5, Carpenter and Kennedy (2001) provide advice on how to (a) define the problem, (b) identify external constraints, (c) establish a conflict management goal, (d) select a meeting structure, (e) identify process steps, (f) determine who should participate, (g) define other roles, and (h) consider other process issues. Most students take what they learned in the course, couple it with the process in chapter 5, and tailor it to their disputes.

Learning Outcomes and Benefits

Assessment

The first deliverable item of the project is the proposal, which asks students to work together to identify and communicate the nature of a public dispute. This forces them to apply their knowledge of what defines a public dispute, and to work together to identify them in the community.

Once the proposal is approved, we continue learning about conflict resolution techniques in class. Throughout the semester, I set aside some class time for students to discuss their projects with the class, to ask questions of each other, and to discuss the analysis process. They learn about each project, and are able to apply what they are learning while "outside" of class to what is being learned inside the classroom.

Project discussion helps students to identify and deal with potential problems that might come up during analysis. For instance, what if a party refuses to talk to group members? What if a party fears repercussions involving the information revealed in an interview? What should a group do if the involved parties ask to see the final product? These and other questions were raised in my course, and each led to valuable teaching moments. For example, in some cases students encounter important stakeholders in the dispute who do not want to talk about it. Sometimes this is for privacy reasons, sometimes it is because a disputant is involved in litigation, and in other cases it is for strategic purposes (e.g., so that the project doesn't alert the other side to strategic actions and interests). If a promise of confidentiality does not convince people to participate, then I ask that the students do their best to construct the disputant's positions and interests from secondary sources, and note this in the project. Other issues and problems that I encounter are explained in the last section of this paper.

Later in the semester, I require students to turn in a written report (typically 30 to 50 pages), and we end the class with group presentations. One week in advance of the presentation, the groups provide each student in the class with an executive summary of their reports, so that the students can read them in advance and prepare questions. The presentations last 15 to 20 minutes, with an additional 15 to 20 minutes reserved for questions.

These projects also serve as excellent hands-on assignments, because group members often end up in their own disputes (e.g., over workloads, meeting times, and other personal issues). I have found through experience that these internal conflicts provide good learning opportunities while studying the material in our course. Because of free rider and other problems, I require students to fill out an evaluation sheet that is turned in at the end of class. The information is confidential so that they feel free candidly to report their experiences (both good and bad) with other group members. I ask them to rate each person on a series of scales that address workload, cooperation, and timeliness. I also ask them to provide details on each part of the assignment that they contributed, and to report on group members who were exemplary (of good or bad traits), and to discuss challenges faced by the group.

The peer evaluations are used in the project's final grade. I first read the written assignment and assign a baseline "group grade," which can be adjusted up or down for individuals based on the evaluations. Students named by others as major contributors might receive a final project grade that is higher than the others. Those who get very low ratings as major detractors might receive a lower grade than the group grade.

Learning Outcomes and Benefits

I have assigned this project over the past five years and each time it has been a success. Every project experience is different. Some groups face challenges, but each learns more about conflict. The project allows them to apply what they have learned in the first two-thirds of the course to a real conflict in the outside world.

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Many important concepts about conflict are exemplified by the projects each semester. For students of public administration and policy, the projects teach (a) how power affects disputes, (b) how people win and lose, (c) how well-intended policies are adopted and yield unintended consequences, and (d) how resources can be better spent to solve problems and manage future conflicts. They see how disputes evolve and how a lack of communication can exacerbate conflict. They also learn about the impact of the lack of inclusion in decision making. Many of the projects provide examples of how a well-intended politician didn't consider all of the potential stakeholders, only to find that a group later emerges to derail the policy during its implementation. Another important concept demonstrated by projects is the impact of history on current conflicts. People are often fighting about things that happened many years ago, and the current issue under debate may only be the tip of the iceberg in terms of addressing the conflict. In the end, the process of building a conflict management program enables students to think critically about how to form procedures when stakeholders have a role in creating the process as well as the decision.

Example of a Recent Project

Since assigning the field projects, students have analyzed more than 20 local disputes. Past projects include a major downtown redevelopment plan, a water dispute between local governments, the widening of a major road, the placement of a crematorium near a subdivision, and a plan for setting aside a forest area as a protected wilderness. I elaborate on one project and its challenges below.

The Public Art Looks Like Sewage!

One of the most interesting projects was a public art dispute involving local neighborhood associations, city staff members, artists, and a city council-woman. Students discovered the dispute when a local newspaper reported that citizens were angry about a public art project installed in their neighborhood. The art was a landscape project on a thoroughfare dividing three organized neighborhoods.

The design symbolized the flow of water from the desert to the city by using beautiful plants, rocks, and other landscaping. It also included pipes coming up from the ground, and going back down into it, with representations of water spilling out. The artist used brown-colored water, because water is not blue when it runs through city streets.

According to the neighbors, the art started going up with very little prior notice, and then the notice that was provided said only that there would be construction in the neighborhood. As the art went up, some neighbors got angry and started calling the project ugly, because the pipes looked like they were carrying "raw sewage" and not water. Complaints fueled attention to the dispute and a response by the city and the artists. The city defended its decision to install the art as a project that had been vetted and approved. The artists were defensive about changing details that already had been approved, and were against any alterations that might infringe upon the creativity of their endeavor. Eventually, the project was stopped so the city could decide what to do about the controversy.

Like most disputes, it was reported in the newspaper as a fight between the neighbors and the city. The dispute, however, was fueled after a local city councilwoman called a public meeting in the neighborhood to hear the concerns of the neighbors.

My students set out to work on the project. They identified and interviewed key stakeholders, learned about the process of selecting and installing public art, and attended public meetings. In the end they discovered, among many things, that the public art project went through a lengthy process for approval, but that this process had occurred about 10 years prior to its installation. About five years before this, Phase I of the project was completed on a section of the road to the south, and it was Phase II that was creating controversy. By the time funds became available for Phase II, 10 years had passed. This meant many of the angry neighbors were not area residents when the project was approved by the city, nor when Phase I was built. There had been no process to inform newer residents about the project, so when Phase II started they were completely surprised, they believed it was being forced upon them, and they were angry about not having a say in the matter.

As my students discovered more background on the dispute, they encountered a dispute of their own along the way. They learned that the city councilwoman who called the meeting had previously backed a number of other local initiatives that had angered these neighborhoods — including a failed attempt at road-widening and a grade-separated interchange on a major road next to the area. When my students attended a public meeting, they discovered that the councilwoman was there to champion the cause of the angry neighbors. With the best of intentions, my students stood up and identified themselves, stated that they were there to analyze the dispute, and that they hoped to help. I learned about this after receiving an angry phone message from the councilwoman, who called me unprofessional for sending my students to a public meeting. According to the councilwoman, they were not part of the neighborhood.

So now there was a conflict about the study of the conflict. This led to one of the best teaching moments and learning opportunities I have experienced in years. The students and I contacted the councilwoman and attempted to find out why she was angry. Although it was a public meeting open to anyone, we apologized to her and attempted to learn more about the dispute. She later provided a full interview to my students and offered her perceptions about her role in the dispute.

After analyzing the conflict, we learned that the councilwoman had essentially called the meeting to earn back the support of her constituents, after previous decisions that had created distrust. She was up for re-election in the coming year and felt that the public art had emerged without any notice or apparent buy-in by the neighbors. In addition, when my students showed up at the meeting, they unknowingly sat on the side of the room where the public artists had been sitting and airing their concerns. So when my students spoke up with their intention of studying the conflict and helping, they were perceived to be on the same side as the artists, and not the neighbors. This prompted the angry phone call and also taught us a lesson about the appearance of bias, about the importance of notice and communication, and about how the public positions of parties can differ greatly from their private interests. We also learned that, when researching a dispute, it can affect the parties and the environment where the dispute occurs. The mere act of students showing up to study the dispute also could give some parties legitimacy and alter the well-laid plans of some stakeholders.

The result of the project was eye-opening to say the least. Students were able to identify "hidden" stakeholders that the media did not interview, they uncovered the roots of the problem, and they learned about the politics associated with it. The fact that so many years had elapsed between the adoption of the art policy and its actual groundbreaking pointed to the need for an implementation plan that would involve stakeholders over time, and throughout the construction process.

The outcome was decided before my students could provide any information for the disputants. A compromise was made that ended the conflict. The project was stopped and the art was dug up and moved to a park on the south-side of town. In its place, the city made amends by providing additional landscaping with a bike path, trees, desert shrubs, and flowers. The artists were unhappy that the plan as approved was altered and that Phase II of the project did not match or coincide with the artistic expression found in Phase I about a mile south of it. Citizens near the park initially objected to the "new" art in their neighborhood, but things eventually quieted down.

Issues and Problems

In the course of the field projects, my students faced problems and challenges, but each was worth the learning experience that it produced. The projects use a method that is commonly employed in the design of conflict management programs around the country, and most of the limitations and problems are encountered in any real dispute resolution process. Still, I pay special attention to what we learn each year and consider past problems in the assignment of future projects.

Here, I end with some of the challenges and issues that might come up if a reader chooses this assignment. Many of my suggestions are not necessarily the same solutions that others might have for the problems.

Remaining Neutral

As an analyst of disputes, I have discussed the importance of remaining neutral. I see both sides of this issue, but impart neutrality to my students as a means ensuring that they get the best possible information by building trust when they talk to people. The disputes are ongoing and sometimes come with strong feelings. I am concerned that involved parties might not speak to the students if they think they are taking sides or are actively involved in the dispute. This is difficult for me as a teacher, because sometimes students are involved in conflict as activists, have a special knowledge of a topic, and can get access to people in the dispute. I want them to choose topics they are interested in and are passionate about. When confronting the issue of neutrality, I try to remind them of the consequences. How might the lack of neutrality affect their objectivity and the veracity of the information? How might it affect them personally if they are involved in the dispute that they are studying? I remind them that the assignment is a class project.

Ethical Issues/Doing Harm

As the public art example demonstrates, there are many ethical issues that can arise when implementing the field project. One is confidentiality. When learning about disputes from stakeholders, students may stumble on information that might be advantageous to other stakeholders if it became public. Information might also harm the person who provides it if they are dealing with strategic issues — such as those that an employer may not want them to discuss. As such, I ask students to be up-front with involved individuals in terms of the information they seek and how it will be used. They choose whether or not to offer interviewees confidentiality, and whether the interviewees will be able to dictate what details can be revealed.

Another ethical issue or problem is that the environment of a conflict can be potentially altered by the act of studying it. One very impressive project on a plan to set aside land for wilderness provided an excellent example of this issue. In the course of identifying and contacting stakeholders, students encountered a local public official and an environmental group that were pushing for more wilderness space. The students' further inquiries were rejected and they were politely asked not to do the project at all. After a second call by the students, a staffer for the elected official contacted me and requested that my students stop using the wilderness area plan as their project. The reason given was that the wilderness project was very "fragile" in nature and that the students might awaken the interest of the opposition at a key time in the process. The staffer said that my students would "stir the pot" by contacting the opposition to interview them. In this case, the opposing stakeholders were local ranchers, the U.S. Border Patrol, and local property owners who had criticized the plan because it might harm access to grazing, access to patrolling the border, and impact local property values. As it turned out, the elected official was in the process of trying to get the wilderness approved and needed some element of stealth to do it. We ended up having a lengthy discussion in class about how studying something can alter it. We decided not to push further with the interviews of those who wished not to be interviewed, but because it was a legitimate public issue, we decided to go forward with the project.

The interests and positions of these stakeholders were interpreted from secondary sources, and from preexisting project details that were posted prominently on Web pages. The students went on to interview the opposing stakeholders, learned more about the dispute, and turned in an excellent project.

Students also have the potential of playing different sides off of one another to get information. Sometimes the fact that some stakeholders are telling one side of the story may lead others — who initially wouldn't participate— to tell the other side. A coercive force occurs when disputing parties fear that their opinions will not be represented because they are silent. Again, this should be addressed as an ethical issue and discussed in the class. It should also be discussed with involved parties when setting the appointment to interview them. With regard to ethics, the more communication and more information provided to parties in advance of the interviews, the better.

Avoiding Danger and Violence

First, let me say that I have never had a project that has resulted in the harm of a student and that this is not a major worry. However, there is always the opportunity for choosing a conflict that results in danger. When screening projects, I consider this potential. For example, one proposed project idea dealt with local conflicts over illegal immigration. While there are many, many projects that could easily be undertaken to address this subject, this particular one dealt with the issue of human smuggling. I was concerned about the militancy of some potential parties and stakeholders. I also wondered if some parties would be impossible to speak to. For instance, it would be difficult to speak with those who hired illegal labor or who aided in human trafficking (e.g., "coyotes"). So the project was not doable and it was potentially dangerous. I talked with the students about what they had hoped to achieve, I pointed out possible problems, and we decided that it would be better for them to choose another topic on the subject of immigration. The students ended up choosing a legislative issue under consideration on the subject of immigration, where they interviewed interest groups, public officials, and others.

Other Pedagogical Issues

While there are many other interesting problems and limitations that come up in the course of these group projects, they generally are seen as uneventful (safe), interesting, and exciting for students. I wanted to mention one additional issue that I address each semester — which is born out of excitement. Because talented young people are working on projects related to very salient public issues, stakeholders and other interested parties get excited about seeing the results and enlisting students to help with their problems. This, of course, is flattering and exciting to the students, as well as to the faculty member. I try to address each of these issues as they come up, and take the time to deliberate with my students about what they should and should not contribute. In one case, a local journalist who had been following the story wanted to do a story on the group and have access to the group project. In another case, parties in the dispute wanted a copy of the project so they could learn more about how to approach it. Others wanted to know what other parties were thinking.

In each case, there is the opportunity for the projects to be useful to others and to have an impact on the community. However, my advice is to proceed with caution. One obvious issue is what to do with information that involved parties say can appear in a report, but that also must remain confidential — even though it easily could be traced back to them. Another is the potential for plans and strategies to unintentionally be turned over to another side of the dispute. There also is the potential for a document to include errors. In each case, groundwork early in the semester helps students communicate what they are hoping to produce, what they can deliver, and what potential harm might occur. When interviewing, they should give participants a choice of what to say or not say. I ask students to consider whether they wish to call the assignment a class project that remains in the students' and instructor's possession, or whether it should be a document that can be requested and seen by all.

Conclusion

The development and implementation of these field projects has been among the most rewarding experiences of my teaching career. I have learned a lot from studying real-world disputes and my students have learned much more about how to approach societal problems, how to fashion public policy, and how to anticipate the consequences of decisions that they and others might make. While I go to great lengths here to point out potential problems and an example of a project that led to some added work, I should point out that the vast majority of projects begin and end smoothly, with no real glitches or issues. While I have no direct measures of project effectiveness, our course evaluations ask students to rate the effectiveness of outside assignments. Other than short reflection papers on in-class simulations, this is the only outside assignment, and it represents about 80 percent of the assignments done outside of class. The outside assignments rating averaged 4.3 (of 5). Forty-two percent of the students rated outside assignments "almost always useful," and another 42 percent rated them "usually useful." The remaining students rated outside assignments as "sometimes useful."

In this paper, I spent time explaining my methodology in hopes that others can help me improve the projects, replicate the projects, or adapt them to other courses. The project may be a useful addition to almost any course on public administration, public policy, or social work. While the project only addresses a portion of Carpenter and Kennedy's (2001) process, I can imagine the establishment of a clinic-based course or capstone where the full semester is used to analyze a dispute, design a process, and help disputants implement the process. This would require some additional background work, or a prerequisite course on conflict management. I imagine that programs in peace studies or conflict resolution could easily add this type of course.

Finally, I have learned much from the experience and foist my worries on the readers only in hope that they will not make some of the same mistakes. Projects like these require lots of monitoring and in-class discussion, and present many teaching opportunities that are sometimes as valuable as the substance of the project itself. Each semester of experience leads to better and better projects.

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APPENDIX
The Project Description

Group Project (Groups of 4-6)

This project is designed to test your knowledge and ability to identify and analyze public disputes that may be faced by any public or nonprofit manager. Each group will identify an actual public dispute that is ongoing in the community. The assignment will be to use the Carpenter & Kennedy book (2001, chaps. 4-7) to design a process to manage this particular dispute.

Note that you will be acting as an analyst here, which will require you to remain neutral. Try to find a topic that interests the group, but where you have no direct stake in the problem. If you know that you are biased toward one side or the other, try to be careful about who you interview. Ask me to share a story from past projects to highlight this problem and issue.

Your group will be asked to propose your topic for approval, which will consist of a one- to two-page synopsis of the dispute. After approval you will divide the work of the project and set out to analyze the dispute's history, the involved parties, and their interests. This will require interviews of dispute parties, and the use of government documents and records, as well as journalistic sources. **You will follow the steps used in Carpenter & Kennedy (2001), but will tailor it to your particular problem.** In the end, I expect a document that could be handed to the parties in the dispute. This report will include all the portions noted on pages 67-69 of the book that are feasible. After analyzing the dispute, you will engage the rest of what the book teaches, but at this point you only will take the opportunity to instruct the relevant parties on how to manage the dispute through the rest of the process. In a sense, you will teach them how to manage and to resolve their dispute.

The project requires approval of the topic (see above), a professional document detailing the dispute resolution program, and a presentation of your project to the class.

Important dates

- Project proposal due Jan. 25th.
- Project Executive Summary (1-2 pages) due April 26th. Must make copies for each student in the class.
- Presentations of your dispute resolution program April 28/May 3
- Final Report due May 5th (last day of spring classes)

The Assignment

The assignment for the paper is somewhat open-ended, but has minimum requirements. If you look on page 67 of Carpenter and Kennedy (2001), you will see primary sections of what they call the process for managing public disputes. There are three broad pieces to this process:

1. *Preparing a Plan;*
2. *Conducting a Program;* and
3. *Carrying Out Agreements.*

A project that meets the minimum requirement of the assignment includes those sections under *Preparing a Plan* on page 67. Of course, I do not mind if you move ahead to the latter sections of *Conducting a Program* and/or *Carrying Out Agreements.* Of course, it takes access and training to be able to do these latter parts. So, in this stage, I am comfortable with you using these sections to teach those in the dispute how to conduct a program or carry it out instead of actually doing it for them.

Paper Requirements

1. **Executive Summary:** Presents a summary of the project in one to three pages that provides an overview of each section of the paper, including any recommendations or policy ideas that you come up with.

2. **Analysis of the Conflict:** Details of this section are found in chapter 4. Subsections in this part might include an overview or background of the problem and its history, issues, parties, and their interests. This will require some research and some interviewing of parties in order to determine this. Note that chapter 4 goes into a lot of detail about interviewing and types of questions.

   This is a portion of the paper that should be started as soon as possible. Access can be a problem at times, and you need to prepare for this and work with it. Be courteous (as I know that you all are) and put yourself in their shoes. They are busy and you should always consider scheduling interviews in advance. When doing my dissertation interviews, I wrote a letter to the persons I wanted to speak with first and explained the project that I wanted to interview them about, and said that I would call in a week. I then called and set up an appointment.

   Knowledge about interview techniques is presented in the chapter, but I can point you to more quick information on this if you need it. Prepare questions in advance and prepare a few follow-ups. Make sure when interviewing to ask each participant similar questions and get through the most important areas. One great additional technique is "snowballing." At the end of the interview, ask who else you should speak with to learn more about the problem, and then schedule an interview with them.

3. **Conflict Management Strategy and Design:** This information follows from chapter 5 in Carpenter and Kennedy (2001) as well as the information gathered in section 2 of the paper. There are eight tasks to consider here on page 93. Be sure you read these sections in chapter 5. Note that nothing will fit perfectly. This assignment is to fit the process to your problem. *Note: You will be designing a program to help them deal with their conflict. You will not be resolving it for them.*

4. **Conclusion:** All good documents have conclusions. Conclude with a brief summary of your major points and your primary recommendations.

The Grade

The grade for this project will be assigned based on the report — its amount of research, attention to detail, and overall polish. It should be well-written, proof read, and presented in the format of any business document. As I said, think of this as a document that you may want to turn over to the parties in the dispute at a later time.

I will assign a grade to the group based on the project as I see it. My late policy is 5 points a day with no questions asked. If your group needs an extra day, then take the points and I will have no hard feelings. Just don't let them add up.

Because this is a group project and some individuals work harder than others, I will ask you to rate each other and will adjust the project grade for the individual according to effort and work. I also will ask you to be specific about which portions of the paper each person worked on. All of this evidence (and any other evidence that I collect) will lead some grades to be higher and some lower than the overall project score.

I will grade the oral reports similarly. Be sure that each person participates in some way in the creation of the presentation and/or in the delivery of the presentation. I would like you all to use Microsoft PowerPoint or some other presentation software.