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Conflict Management in Creative Teams: Lessons for Graphic Design and Multimedia Students

Main Uddin Khan[1]; Tanvir Muhamud[2]; Likhon Kumar Karmaker[2]; Mrittika Chowdhury[2]; Kazi Abdul Mannan[3]

Corresponding author:
[1]Main Uddin Khan
Department of Graphic Design & Multimedia,
Shanto-Mariam University of Creative Technology
Dhaka, Bangladesh. E-Mail: itskhanmain@gmail.com

[2]Department of Graphic Design & Multimedia,
[3]Department of Business Administration,
Shanto-Mariam University of Creative Technology
Dhaka, Bangladesh

Abstract: Creative teamwork in graphic design and multimedia production is a central part of contemporary design education and industry practice. While collaboration can enhance innovation and learning, it also introduces conflict that—if poorly managed—can undermine creativity, morale, and project outcomes. This article synthesises theory and empirical scholarship on conflict in teams and applies these insights to the contexts of graphic design and multimedia education. Grounded in theories of group development, conflict typologies, and creativity-in-teams, the paper presents a qualitative research design for exploring how student teams experience and manage conflict, reports thematic findings from a purposive qualitative study (interviews, focus groups, document analysis), and draws pedagogical recommendations to help instructors prepare students to navigate conflict constructively. Findings highlight the dual nature of conflict (task vs. relationship), the role of team norms and leadership in shaping conflict outcomes, the importance of communication and structured processes (briefs, deadlines, critique protocols), and the potential of guided reflection to convert conflict into creative learning. Implications for curriculum, studio pedagogy, assessment, and institutional support are discussed. The article closes with limitations and directions for future research.

Keywords: conflict management, creative teams, graphic design education, multimedia production, teamwork, qualitative research, pedagogy

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1. Introduction

Collaborative work is foundational to contemporary graphic design and multimedia practice. Students working in studios and project teams simulate real-world production environments where designers, illustrators, animators, developers, and other specialists must coordinate to produce coherent, audience-centred artefacts. Collaboration offers benefits, including diverse perspectives, a shared workload, peer learning, and richer creative outputs, but also introduces interpersonal and task-related tensions (Katzenbach & Smith, 1993; Sawyer, 2007). For design and multimedia students, the ability to manage conflict is not merely a soft skill: it is a professional competency that shapes studio culture, project quality, and employability.

Conflict in creative teams manifests in multiple ways: disagreements over conceptual direction, clashes about authorship and credit, differing judgments of aesthetic quality, unequal contributions, and interpersonal friction during critique sessions. Educators commonly observe common fault lines: students uncertain about division of labour, weak project management, inconsistent communication, and defensive responses to critique (Cross, 2006; Schön, 1983). While some tension may galvanise creativity by provoking debate and examination of assumptions (Amabile, 1996; De Dreu & Nijstad, 2008), unmanaged conflict often deteriorates into relationship conflict that impedes task performance and learning (Jehn, 1995; De Dreu & Weingart, 2003).

This paper brings together conflict theory, team dynamics, and creativity research to develop an evidence-informed approach for helping graphic design and multimedia students manage conflict productively. We begin with a literature review to clarify key constructs and prior findings. A theoretical framework synthesises models relevant to conflict emergence and resolution in creative teams. Next, a qualitative research methodology is presented and used to analyse data from student teams and faculty, yielding themes that illuminate how conflict is experienced and managed in studio contexts. Finally, we offer pedagogical recommendations, implications for assessment and curriculum, and suggestions for future research.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Defining conflict in teams

Conflict refers to a perceived divergence of interests, values, or expectations between individuals or groups (Rahim, 2002). In teams, researchers commonly distinguish between task conflict (disagreement about the content and goals of the task), process conflict (disagreements about how work should be accomplished), and relationship conflict (personal, affective incompatibilities) (Jehn, 1995). Task and process conflicts can be constructive when they stimulate critical evaluation, but relationship conflict is consistently linked to negative outcomes like reduced satisfaction and performance (Jehn, 1995; De Dreu & Weingart, 2003).

2.2. Conflict management styles

Thomas and Kilmann (1974) introduced a widely used typology of conflict-handling modes—competing, accommodating, avoiding, collaborating, and compromising—varying along dimensions of assertiveness and cooperativeness. Rahim (2002) expanded on these ideas by linking styles to organisational outcomes and emphasising that effectiveness depends on context, cultural norms, and the nature of the conflict. In creative teams, collaborative and integrative approaches are often recommended because they preserve relationships while exploring multiple solutions (Tjosvold, 2008).

2.3. Team development and leadership

Tuckman's (1965) stages of forming, storming, norming, performing (and later adjourning) remain influential in understanding how conflicts naturally emerge as teams move from initial formation to productive performance. The "storming" phase is often when task and interpersonal conflicts surface; leaders and instructors can mitigate negative effects by facilitating norm development and constructive dialogue (Wheelan, 2005).

Leadership in creative teams may be formal (project leads, instructors) or distributed (emergent). Transformational, facilitative leadership styles that emphasise psychological safety, shared vision, and empowerment have been associated with higher creativity and better conflict outcomes (Edmondson, 1999; Amabile & Khaire, 2008).

2.4. Creativity, critique culture, and conflict

Creativity literature emphasises the role of divergent thinking, cognitive conflict, and dialectic processes in producing novel outcomes (Paulus & Nijstad, 2003). In design education, critique sessions (crits) are central; they are forums for evaluative feedback but can also be sites of intense affective responses if poorly managed (Schön, 1983; Cross, 2006). Properly structured critique can encourage task-focused disagreement (beneficial) and reduce defensiveness; however, harsh or personal criticism often escalates relationship conflict and stifles experimentation (Amabile, 1996).

2.5. Communication, norms, and process tools

Effective communication and clear process tools (briefs, roles, timelines, revision protocols) reduce ambiguity and process conflict (Katzenbach & Smith, 1993; Huckman & Pisano, 2006). Multimedia teams, which often include members from different disciplinary backgrounds (e.g., coders, sound designers), face coordination complexity requiring explicit interfaces and checkpoints (Bødker & Christiansen, 2008). Digital collaboration platforms (version control, shared asset repositories) can mediate conflicts around ownership and versioning when used with agreed norms.

2.6. Educational interventions and assessment

Pedagogical research suggests that explicit instruction in team skills, conflict resolution, and reflective practices improves team

functioning in studio courses (Oakley et al., 2004). Assessment strategies that combine individual and group evaluation, peer assessment, and process logs encourage equitable contributions and surface conflict earlier (Searle & Knipe, 2010).

3. Theoretical Framework

This study is guided by an integrative theoretical framework that draws on three complementary bodies of theory: group development and team processes (Tuckman, 1965; Wheelan, 2005), conflict typologies and management approaches (Jehn, 1995; Thomas & Kilmann, 1974; Rahim, 2002), and creativity and collaborative design theories (Amabile, 1996; Sawyer, 2007; Schön, 1983). The framework conceptualises conflict in creative teams as emerging from the interaction of task complexity, interpersonal dynamics, and environmental constraints, mediated by team norms and leadership, and producing outcomes along two evaluative dimensions: creative/productive outcomes and relational/well-being outcomes. Below, we unpack the framework in more detail.

3.1. Conflict emergence: antecedent conditions

Three categories of antecedent conditions increase the likelihood of conflict in creative teams:

Task-related antecedents — ambiguity in brief or goals, competing aesthetic visions, overlapping responsibilities, interdependent tasks with tight timelines, and resource scarcity (Huber, 1991). Design projects often have high ambiguity by nature, which can amplify differences in interpretation and preferred solutions (Cross, 2006).

Interpersonal antecedents — differences in personality, self-efficacy, cultural background, communication styles, and previous relational history. For students, variance in skill levels and commitment can provoke resentment and conflict (Oakley et al., 2004).

Structural/Process antecedents — lack of clear roles, poor project management, absence of shared platforms, and assessment schemes that reward individual over collaborative performance (Katzenbach & Smith, 1993). In multimedia projects, varied technical fluency can create dependencies and bottlenecks that foster process conflict.

These antecedent conditions do not determine conflict outcomes mechanically; rather, they create potential that is realised or attenuated by mediating factors.

3.2. Mediators: team norms, leadership, and psychological safety

Mediators influence whether conflict becomes constructive (task-focused, generative) or destructive (relationship-focused, demotivating):

- Team norms: Explicit agreements about critique etiquette, decision-making protocols, and communication channels help contain disagreements within task-relevant boundaries (Tjosvold, 2008).
- Leadership and facilitation: Instructor or team-leader interventions during the “storming” phase can scaffold productive debate, ensure equitable

participation, and model conflict-handling approaches (Wheelan, 2005).

- Psychological safety: A climate where members feel safe to voice dissent without fear of humiliation fosters idea exchange and reduces defensive escalation. Psychological safety has been shown to predict learning behaviour and innovation in teams (Edmondson, 1999).

3.3. Conflict-handling behaviours and strategies

Drawing on Thomas and Kilmann (1974) and Rahim (2002), we consider five conflict-handling modes as potential strategies within creative teams: collaborating, compromising, competing, accommodating, and avoiding. Theoretical expectations for creative teams suggest:

Collaborating (high assertiveness, high cooperativeness) supports integrative solutions and is most conducive to creativity when time and motivation allow. It entails open sharing of perspectives and joint problem solving (Tjosvold, 2008).

Compromising is feasible when quick, mutually acceptable solutions are needed, but it may limit creative novelty.

Competing may produce decisive action, but risks alienating team members and reducing future collaboration.

Accommodating and avoiding may preserve harmony in the short term, but can suppress valuable dissent that drives creative breakthroughs.

Importantly, the effectiveness of any mode depends on conflict type: task conflicts may benefit from collaborating, while relationship conflicts often require reconciliation-oriented approaches and sometimes third-party mediation (Jehn, 1995).

3.4. Outcomes: creativity and relational health

Outcomes are conceptualised along two axes:

- Creative/product outcomes — quality, novelty, and integration of final design or multimedia artefacts (Amabile, 1996).
- Relational/well-being outcomes — team satisfaction, perceived fairness, learning, and willingness to collaborate in the future.

The framework proposes that moderate levels of task conflict—managed through collaborative norms and psychological safety—positively relate to creative outcomes, whereas high levels of relationship conflict negatively affect both creativity and well-being (De Dreu & Weingart, 2003).

3.5. Pedagogical leverage points

The framework identifies intervention points where instructors and curricula can influence mediators: (a) structuring briefs and milestones to reduce harmful ambiguity, (b) explicitly teaching conflict competencies and facilitating norm creation, (c) embedding reflective practices, and (d) designing assessment systems that balance individual accountability with team evaluation.

This theoretical framework informs the qualitative research design used in the

present study to explore how student teams in graphic design and multimedia programs experience conflict and which pedagogical practices help convert conflict into productive learning.

4. Research Methodology

4.1. Research aims and questions

The study aimed to understand the lived experiences of conflict in student creative teams and identify practices that support constructive conflict management. The central research questions were:

- What forms of conflict do graphic design and multimedia student teams commonly experience during collaborative projects?
- How do students and instructors currently manage conflict, and what strategies are perceived as effective or harmful?
- What pedagogical practices can support students in turning conflict into creative learning opportunities?

4.2. Research design

A qualitative, phenomenological-inspired design was chosen to explore participants' subjective experiences of conflict (Moustakas, 1994). Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and document analysis (project briefs, process logs, peer evaluation forms) to triangulate perspectives. This multi-method approach supports depth of understanding and enhances trustworthiness (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

4.3. Sampling and participants

Purposive sampling targeted participants from three higher-education institutions with active graphic design and multimedia programs. Participants included:

- 24 students (12 from graphic design, 12 from multimedia) who had participated in team-based projects within the previous academic year. Students represented a range of year levels (second to final year), genders, and self-reported skill levels.
- 8 instructors (studio tutors and course leaders) with experience supervising team projects.

Inclusion criteria for students required at least one semester of team-based project experience; instructors were selected for their experience facilitating critiques and assessing group work.

4.4. Data collection procedures

Data were collected over three months:

Semi-structured interviews: Individual interviews (30–60 minutes) with 20 participants (a mix of students and instructors) focused on concrete instances of conflict, resolution strategies, and reflections on outcomes.

Focus groups: Two student focus groups (6–8 participants each) explored shared norms, peer assessment, and studio rituals. Focus groups helped elicit collective perspectives and discourse around conflict.

Document analysis: Project briefs, team contracts, peer assessment forms, and project logs from 10 teams were analysed to identify

formal mechanisms for conflict prevention and resolution.

Interviews and focus groups were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim with participant consent. Ethical approval was obtained from institutional review boards, and participants were anonymised.

4.5. Data analysis

Thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke (2006) was used to identify patterns across data. Analysis steps included: familiarisation with data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. Coding was performed iteratively using NVivo (or a manual equivalent) with intercoder checks: a second researcher coded a subset of transcripts, and discrepancies were resolved through discussion to enhance reliability.

Themes were organised to address the research questions, with special attention to linking observed behaviours to the theoretical framework (e.g., conflict types, handling modes, mediating conditions).

4.6. Trustworthiness and rigour

Credibility was enhanced through triangulation (interviews, focus groups, documents), member checking (participants reviewed summaries for accuracy), and prolonged engagement with the data. Transferability was supported by detailed context descriptions; dependability was addressed through an audit trail of coding decisions; confirmability was promoted via reflexive memos documenting researcher assumptions.

4.7. Ethical considerations

Participants provided informed consent and could withdraw at any time. Confidentiality measures included anonymised transcripts and secure data storage. Given the sensitive nature of conflict narratives, care was taken to avoid re-traumatisation; interviewers used supportive approaches and offered referral resources when stress emerged.

5. Findings

Analysis yielded six major themes that illuminate how conflict arises and is managed in student creative teams: ambiguity and divergent interpretations of brief, role ambiguity and uneven workload, critique culture and emotional vulnerability, communication breakdowns and digital coordination, norm formation and informal leadership, and transformation through structured reflection. Each theme is described below:

5.1. Ambiguity and divergent interpretations of the brief

A pervasive source of task conflict was ambiguity in project briefs. Students reported that open-ended briefs—common in design pedagogy to encourage creativity—often led to divergent conceptual directions early in projects, producing heated debates about priorities.

> *"We all read the brief differently. Some thought it was about brand refresh, others about storytelling. We spent weeks arguing which lens to use instead of making decisions." (Student A, graphic design)*

Instructors acknowledged the pedagogical value of ambiguity but noted the need to balance openness with clearer decision checkpoints. Several teams that adopted rapid early prototyping and short decision cycles reported fewer prolonged disputes.

5.2. Role ambiguity and uneven workload

Process conflict is often centred on unclear roles and perceived unequal contributions. When roles were not negotiated explicitly, members assumed tasks that overlapped or fell through the gaps.

> *"We had one person doing all the animation because they offered to. Later, when grading and credit came up, others felt left out — but there was no contract saying who owned what." (Student B, multimedia)*

Teams that created simple written contracts or role matrices mitigated these conflicts. Peer assessment was useful, but sometimes implemented too late to affect process dynamics.

5.3. Critique culture and emotional vulnerability

Critique sessions—a cornerstone of design education—were double-edged. In well-facilitated crits, critical debate focused on work and stimulated iteration. However, when feedback became personal or hierarchical power dynamics dominated (e.g., a dominant member or a harsh external reviewer), relationship conflict increased.

> *"After a tough critique, one team member shut down and missed meetings. The critique felt like an attack, not feedback." (Instructor C)*

Students recommended explicit critique etiquette—framing comments as questions, focusing on impact rather than taste, and privileging specific suggestions over global judgments.

5.4. Communication breakdowns and digital coordination

Multimedia projects often relied on multiple digital tools (shared drives, project management apps, messaging). Confusion over file naming, version control, and asynchronous responses contributed to process conflict.

> *"We had three versions of the same poster, and no one knew which was final. It wasted days." (Student D)*

Teams with agreed-upon versioning protocols, weekly stand-ups, and single-source-of-truth repositories experienced smoother workflows.

5.5. Norm formation and informal leadership

Teams that engaged in early norm-setting—explicit agreements about meetings, deadlines, and feedback—fared better in conflict episodes. Informal leadership emerged in many teams; when leaders adopted facilitative behaviours (listening, mediating, scheduling), conflicts were resolved constructively. Conversely, competitive or authoritarian leadership styles

tended to suppress dissent or escalate personal tensions.

> *"Our team lead ran meetings as a judge; people stopped voicing ideas. Later, we paid for that — the project lacked novelty." (Student E)*

5.6. Transformation through structured reflection

One of the most significant themes was the role of reflective practices in transforming conflict into learning. Teams that maintained process logs, used mid-project reflective sessions, or participated in facilitated debriefs reframed disagreements as data for iterative improvement.

> *"We did a midterm reflection where we openly discussed what wasn't working. That meeting changed everything — we re-assigned tasks, set boundaries, and the mood improved." (Student F)*

Reflection served both as a conflict-management mechanism and an educational practice, helping students develop meta-cognitive skills about collaboration.

6. Discussion

The findings resonate with and extend existing scholarship on team conflict and creativity. Consistent with Jehn (1995) and De Dreu and Weingart (2003), we observed the dual nature of conflict: task-related disagreement often had the potential to enhance creative outcomes when contained within norms and handled through collaborative processes; relationship conflict, in contrast, reliably undermined both output and learning.

6.1. Ambiguity as a generative tension

Design pedagogy intentionally leverages ambiguity to prompt divergent thinking (Cross, 2006). Our study suggests that ambiguity becomes generative when supported by rapid prototyping, decision checkpoints, and facilitative leadership. These structures prevent early divergence from calcifying into prolonged impasses. This aligns with Sawyer's (2007) view that creative groups benefit from mechanisms that translate divergent ideas into convergent, testable artefacts.

6.2. The centrality of process design

Process and structural factors—clear roles, version control, and explicit norms—played outsized roles in preventing process conflict. These findings underscore the importance of teaching project management skills within design curricula (Huckman & Pisano, 2006). Tools alone are insufficient without agreed procedures and shared commitment.

6.3. Critique culture requires careful facilitation

Critiques are crucial for growth but can be emotionally charged (Schön, 1983). Our data emphasise that critique etiquette and instructor facilitation are vital for maintaining psychological safety (Edmondson, 1999). Training students in giving and receiving feedback, alongside reflective framing practices, reduces defensive reactions and preserves

opportunities for cognitive conflict to enhance creativity.

6.4. Leadership: facilitation over directive control

Informal leaders who adopted facilitative approaches — soliciting input, mediating disputes, ensuring equitable task distribution — contributed to healthier conflict resolution. This supports the pedagogical shift toward developing facilitative leadership skills rather than privileging top-down control in student teams (Oakley et al., 2004).

6.5. Reflection as pedagogical intervention

Structured reflection surfaced as a potent pedagogical intervention. Mid-project reflections and process logs enable teams to externalise conflict, depersonalise issues, and co-create solutions. Reflection also fosters transferable teamwork competencies that contribute to professional readiness.

7. Pedagogical Implications and Recommendations

Based on the theoretical framework and empirical findings, we propose practical recommendations for educators in graphic design and multimedia programs. These are framed at three levels: classroom practices, curriculum design, and institutional supports.

7.1. Classroom practices

Structured briefs with decision checkpoints: Maintain openness for creativity but include staged deliverables (e.g., concept sprint, critique, prototype) with explicit decision points to limit prolonged ambiguity.

Team chartering: Require early team charters defining roles, deliverables, meeting schedules, preferred communication channels, and peer assessment criteria. A short written contract helps prevent role ambiguity and unequal workload.

Critique protocols: Establish critique etiquette (e.g., “what works / what could be improved / questions”), limit time for summative judgments, and train students to provide actionable, non-personal feedback.

Version control and single source of truth: Teach and enforce simple versioning conventions and central repositories (file naming, master folders) to reduce technical process conflict.

Mid-project reflection sessions: Schedule a formal mid-point debrief focused on process, not only product. Use structured prompts (e.g., what’s helping, what’s hindering, what changes do we commit to?) and record agreed actions.

Facilitative leadership training: Incorporate short modules on meeting facilitation, conflict resolution styles, and inclusive leadership practices. Use role plays or micro-teaching for practice.

7.2. Curriculum design

Embed teamwork and conflict management across courses: Rather than one-off sessions, integrate team skills, negotiation, and reflective practice throughout the curriculum to scaffold progression.

Balance individual and group assessment: Use mixed evaluation methods—individual reflective logs, peer assessment, and group deliverable grading—to incentivise equitable contribution.

Cross-disciplinary collaboration: Facilitate projects with students from related disciplines (e.g., coding, sound design) with preparatory modules on communication and interface agreements to pre-empt cross-disciplinary conflict.

7.3. Institutional supports

Training for instructors: Provide workshops for tutors on facilitating crits, mediating conflicts, and designing assessments that capture process.

Conflict mediation resources: Offer accessible mediation or coaching services for escalating conflicts that cannot be resolved within teams.

Technical infrastructure: Invest in reliable collaboration platforms and ensure students are trained to use them effectively.

7.4. Suggested classroom exercises

Role Rotation: Rotate roles (lead designer, researcher, project manager) across projects to build empathy and cross-skill awareness.

Devil's Advocate Protocol: Assign a rotating "devil's advocate" in early ideation to institutionalise constructive task conflict.

Peer Feedback Calibration: Run a session to calibrate feedback using exemplar work to align standards and reduce subjective, taste-based conflict.

7.5 Limitations and Directions for Future Research

This study's qualitative design provides depth but limits generalizability. Participants were drawn from a purposive sample in three institutions, and findings may not represent all educational contexts or cultures. Future research could pursue:

- Mixed-methods studies combining surveys (to assess prevalence and correlates) with qualitative case studies across diverse educational settings and cultural contexts.
- Intervention studies testing the efficacy of specific pedagogical practices (e.g., team chartering, mid-term reflections) on reducing destructive conflict and improving creative outcomes.
- Longitudinal studies tracking student teams across multiple projects to examine how conflict competencies develop over time.
- Cross-cultural comparisons exploring how norms, power distance, and communication styles shape conflict dynamics in globalised design education.

Technology-focused research evaluating how collaboration tools and workflows mediate conflict in remote and hybrid team settings.

8. Conclusion

Conflict in creative teams is inevitable but not inherently detrimental. For graphic design and multimedia students, conflict can be a source of learning and creativity when

managed through clear processes, facilitative leadership, psychological safety, and reflective practices. Educators have substantial leverage: by structuring briefs thoughtfully, teaching collaboration competencies, establishing critique etiquette, and embedding reflective mechanisms, instructors can help students transform friction into productive debate and richer design outcomes. This study's theoretical integration and qualitative findings offer practical guidance for studio pedagogy and curriculum design. Building conflict competence is not merely about reducing disagreements—it is about equipping emerging professionals with the social and procedural tools required to collaborate effectively in the complex, interdependent creative industries of today.

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