

Becoming Reflective Practitioners

by Michael Lang

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I have been a mediator for nearly 20 years, and for the past five years have directed a graduate program in conflict resolution at Antioch University. In this article, I want to talk about a process that seeks to educate reflective practitioners: those individuals whose practices are grounded in theories of conflict and conflict resolution, who are aware of ongoing research that informs their practices, and who continually refine their skills through a rigorous process of self-reflection



My interest in the principles of reflective practice was first nurtured by an experience at a professional conference where I attended a workshop teaching the use of specialized practice skills. Following a description by the presenters of various intervention techniques, I volunteered to mediate a role play dispute in which I would attempt to use the presenters' approaches. The result was a remarkable experience; I successfully used the technique. With praises from the presenters and accolades from the audience, I was flush with the success of my intervention.

Later, however, I wondered how I had accomplished what the others were convinced I had achieved. I had no notion of why the approaches I used were successful; and no idea how I might replicate the intervention with other clients in another setting. I had dutifully reproduced what the presenters had demonstrated, but the presenters did not discuss the theoretical basis for these approaches. As a result, I had no understanding of the types of situations when these techniques would be useful, why they would be utilized, nor how I might incorporate the lessons of this workshop in my practice.

I realized that without understanding the underlying theoretical principles of practice, we are merely skilled mechanics trying out one tool after another without understanding what tool would be appropriate to the task. We apply techniques and interventions without full consideration of the reasons behind such approaches, without understanding their likely consequences, without the ability to evaluate the success or failure of those interventions, and without the tools and resources to learn from each experience.

Theory provides both a foundation for our work and a way to understand the nature of the process we are managing. It gives the practitioner a foundation upon which to base an assessment of a conflict situation and to design an appropriate intervention.

For example, many mediators learn to caucus after the parties "tell their stories," to explore further the person's concerns and interests; and many practitioners dutifully follow this structure. But, many mediators fail to grasp the potential gains and risks of separating the parties at an early

(or any) stage in the mediation. In the mediation of a dispute between two teenagers where the mediator (having been taught always to caucus) separated the parties at an early time in the mediation, one of the teenagers refused to participate further in the process. An underlying issue in the dispute was that one of the teenagers believed that the other had "ratted him out" to the school principal. Without knowing that history, the mediator had inadvertently exacerbated the feelings of mistrust and anger. It was only after one of the teenagers stormed out of the mediation that the mediator learned this vital information. Understanding the theory that underlies the use of a caucus might have helped this mediator avoid an unfortunate and premature end to the mediation.

The challenge I face as an educator is how to teach theory and help practitioners integrate that theory into their practices. At Antioch, with the assistance of colleagues Dan Joyce, Cathie Kriener, Alison Taylor and Mary Ann Zaha, we have developed methods for teaching mediation skills that incorporate theory and teach the concepts and skills of reflective practice the understanding of relevant theory, the ability to incorporate theory into practice, and the development of the skill of self-reflection.

We teach students that they must experiment, that is to learn something new about the situation, the conflict, and the disputants. An experiment begins with the development of an hypothesis, a sense of the case, an idea of what the conflict is about. Then, the mediator asks questions to test this hypothesis, allowing herself to be surprised, to learn how the parties view the conflict and their involvement, to understand their sense of things. The mediator responds to this new information, evaluates and reforms her hypothesis and again tests out her revised ideas. In this way, the mediator allows the information from the clients to direct her thinking and her intervention approaches.

For example, consider a community mediation in which the dispute initially appears to center on the lack of control of an energetic and playful dog who frightens young children in the neighborhood. Seeking options for restraining the dog appears to be the most fruitful avenue to pursue. A reflective practitioner would test out this hypothesis, ask questions, be prepared to be surprised by the answers, and not to assume that the most visible problem is the real source of the conflict. The mediator might learn that the problem arose only after the city closed a neighborhood park where the children played and the dog was exercised, and that the parties might work cooperatively in persuading the city to reopen the park.

To help students learn the process of analysis and reflection, we utilize a coaching method that includes demonstrations, role play exercises and the use of elicitive questions that draw out the students' own understanding of their strategies and approaches. We assist them progress in their development as practitioners from novices to artists. To learn a body of knowledge and set of practitioner skills is only the first step in which the novice becomes skilled in the application of a variety of techniques and strategies. In **The Reflective Practitioner, How Professionals Think in Action** (1983), Donald Schon describes artistry in this way

Every competent practitioner can recognize phenomena...for which he cannot give a reasonably accurate or complete description. In his day to day practice he makes innumerable judgments of quality for which he cannot state adequate criteria, and he displays rules for which he cannot state the rules and procedures. (pp. 49-50)

Our experience confirms that mediators learn the artistry of practice. They learn to take the unexplainable, the seemingly intuitive, and by describing the elements and pieces of knowing and understanding that lead to the "spontaneous, skillful execution of the performance..." **Educating the Reflective Practitioner**, Donald Schon, 1987, p. 25), they develop artistry in their practices. Learning artistry requires a method of professional education different from that generally employed in professional education; a method we have been developing with our graduate students and in professional trainings over the past 5 years.

In an effort to explain artistry and how it can be learned, I asked a group of students to recall a successful conflict resolution experience. One student, a social worker, had decided to bring together the mother of children in foster care, the children, and the foster parents to talk about possible reunification of the family. When I asked why she did this, she said it "just seemed to be a good idea." Upon questioning the student about the basis of her decision to convene the meeting, she identified many pieces of information and about the participants about the risks and gains that might flow from such a meeting. A decision that at first appeared to be intuitive, was in fact based on a knowledge of the parties, an understanding of how to help them talk, and experience in working with other families in similar settings.

Of the instructional methods we utilize, the most important is the use of elicitive questions. In skill development sessions, coaches engage in an interactive process of questioning to encourage the student to be reflective.

By allowing the students to identify the aspects of their work that troubled them, as well as those where their interventions were helpful and effective, the coach supports the students' learning by helping them to identify their hypotheses, the reasoning behind their strategies and approaches, and the impact of their interventions on the disputants.

This educational method differs from a prescriptive approach in which the instructor "corrects" the mistakes of the trainee, pointing out where the student has failed to use appropriate skills, or overlooked interventions or techniques that could have been used. The prescriptive teaching method generally leads students to modeling the behavior of the instructor and does not lead to insight; it produces practitioners who are skilled mechanics, but who lack artistry. Without the ability to understand the reasoning behind intervention strategies and techniques, the student will not experiment, and will consistently frame issues narrowly based upon a set of prescribed problems sets.

I want to present a coaching exchange that occurred during role play debriefing. During the early

stage of the mediation, the mediator had thoughtfully summarized the first party's story. Before she could summarize the second party's story, the two participants began talking in a very constructive though heated manner about their positions and concerns. After observing this discussion for several minutes, the mediator interrupted and summarized the second person's story.

MDL (to mediator) Why did you decide to stop their conversation now and summarize the second person's story?

MEDIATOR I was taught that summarizing helped to clarify the story and to build trust with the party.

MDL (to mediator) Would you like to ask the participant if he felt a lack of trust or connection?

SECOND PARTICIPANT No, I could see that she was being very attentive when I spoke. I knew she was interested in what I had to say.

MDL (to mediator) What do you make of that information?

MEDIATOR I am aware that I was uncertain how to control the process. I didn't know whether I needed to do anything about the way they were talking with each other. I was afraid I might not be able to help them if it got more heated.

This mediator became aware of what she did **not** know, and was able to identify additional skills and knowledge she would need to be an effective mediator. I did not need to correct her. I helped her to identify the problem with her approach and ways in which she might improve the quality of her practice. In this reflexive dialogue the mediator gained an understanding of competent practice, learned something about the timing of interventions, and she learned to reflect on her practice.

What is missing from many educational methods used to train mediators is the active process of engagement between student and teacher, the use of modeling to build skills and artistry, the interactive process by which what seems unattainable to the novice becomes learnable. The key difference in our approach is that we engage students in a dialogue, using elicitive questions, building not merely a body of knowledge and skills, but also the student's ability to learn from their experiences.

If the field of conflict resolution is to be credible and accepted as a distinct profession, then we must, without sacrificing the inclusivity that has been its hallmark, address concerns about competence. We must be concerned with nurturing excellence in practice. I believe we can achieve this goal by utilizing elicitive teaching methods and by training mediators to be reflective practitioners.

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