

The Highs and Lows of Mediation Training - Part 1

Kluwer Mediation Blog
June 7, 2014

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Please refer to this post as: Sabine Walsh, 'The Highs and Lows of Mediation Training - Part 1', Kluwer Mediation Blog, June 7, 2014, <http://mediationblog.kluwerarbitration.com/2014/06/07/the-highs-and-lows-of-mediation-training-part-1/>

Over the last number of years I have been educating mediators in a variety of settings, professional and academic. In anticipation of a new training venture due to kick off later this year, which should be a bit of a "green field site" in terms of curriculum design and implementation, I have decided to reflect on some of the lessons I have learned so far and what they might lead me to do differently.

1. It helps if your students want to be there

It was the Friday before a holiday weekend at the end of the university term and I was teaching a non-mandatory class on conflict resolution. About a third of the students who were supposed to be there were there. I had prepared a lively presentation, using cartoons, graphics, very little text, and a liberal scattering of YouTube clips. It only took five minutes for the first yawn and ten until I noticed the first student smirking at a text they were reading on their phone. It was a long two hours... Despite my best efforts, engagement with me was minimal and engagement with the subject matter was almost non-existent. I didn't sweat it. The students in question were undergraduates, studying for a degree for which conflict resolution was useful, but not essential, and they were focused on the impending exams.

It can be very unsettling though when your target audience presents as disinterested. Early in my career, I gave a talk on mediation to a retired businessman's association. Within minutes half the audience had dozed off. Sweating, I tried to pepper my talk with case examples and interesting anecdotes but the gentle snoring continued. I felt an utter failure but on leaving, the talk organiser came over and said quietly "Don't worry love, they are all on medication." The talk had taken place in a retirement home. Which brings me to lesson number 2...

2. Don't take it personally

Mediation training can trigger some interesting emotions in students. I have had a barrister stamping her feet and shouting about "just wanting to tell them what to do", someone falling asleep during a role-play and, more seriously, a woman weeping quietly at the back of the room during a family mediation training. This latter situation could have been avoided by some pre-course screening by the organisers which may have picked up that she had recently come through a traumatic separation herself but no amount of screening can prevent course participants from, at times, reacting unexpectedly to some of the content or activities during a training course.

We all experience conflict, and learning new ways of thinking about and addressing conflict can trigger discomfort or unpleasant memories and re-stimulate difficult emotions. It can however also bring about new insight and deep seated change in people. The key for a trainer is, on the one hand, to be aware of what might be causing unexpected reactions or engagements in a course, and to deal with these reactions sensitively and calmly, rather than engaging (as can happen easily) in anxious re-evaluation of one's training skills or course content. Being flexible enough to, for example, veer away from your timetable to incorporate some time for individual support or a fun activity to lighten the mood may be all that is required.

On the other hand, it is even more important for the trainer to have a sufficient level of self-awareness in order to avoid their own experiences driving the dynamic in the classroom. This includes being aware of tendencies to be self-critical or overly perfectionistic or to have unrealistic expectation of the group or the learning outcomes, and being aware of how one's own conflict experiences can influence our engagement with the subject and the student. Get out your reflective journals, fellow trainers!

3. Brush up on your ICT skills!

Live role-plays, useful and all as they are, will no longer cut the mustard for many students of mediation. After consistently receiving feedback asking for video mediations to be included in trainings I succumbed and included not only videotaped mediations, but other ICT based exercises, such as online conflict styles inventories, "what-happens-next" mediation cartoons and, of course, distance learning platforms which can be extraordinarily useful when face to face time is limited and you want students to know the theory before they come in for the practical session.

Why use "non-live" media like video mediations? Several reasons - they can break the ice and get students into feedback mode when they do not yet know each other, and the performance anxiety that comes with role-playing early on in a course can be eased. Positive skills modelling can come from watching experienced mediators and video role-plays can be more realistic, particularly if actors are used. Conversely, using a video featuring a "bad" mediation or insufficient skills can, when used towards the end of a training for example, be an opportunity for students to realise how much they have learned, when they can point out failings and suggest alternatives, without the risk of upsetting their classmates.

I would not for a moment suggest that such tools should replace more active or task orientated learning experiences, and new strategies such as adventure learning have exciting potential in mediation training (more on that soon), but used judiciously, technology can inject a different dynamic, a broader experience and some plain old fun into the classroom which, in my experience is key to any successful learning experience. (If you don't believe me, have a look at "[It's Not About the Nail!](#)" in the context of listening...)

Just make sure you know how to work whatever technology you are using! Nothing will frustrate a class as much as the trainer who cannot make the technology work or isn't competent in its use - being outside your comfort zone is not a good idea when trying to run a webinar.

That is not to say that you should not get out of your comfort zone at all in training, in fact this can be a very effective strategy...more on that, knowing your audience, and some training "fails" next month...!