

# Kluwer Mediation Blog

## A Recipe for Learning

Charlie Irvine (University of Strathclyde) · Thursday, April 12th, 2012



I was recently given an extraordinary birthday present: a day at the Nick Nairn Cook School ([www.nicknairncookschool.com](http://www.nicknairncookschool.com)). Nick Nairn is one of Scotland's most famous celebrity chefs, known for his respect for traditional Scottish fare, and as something of a foody I couldn't think of a better way to spend a Saturday.

I wasn't disappointed. The chef (not Nick himself) was great and the dinner sumptuous. But as soon as I sat down I started to spot parallels with my work teaching mediation. I was as fascinated by the artistry of the teaching as the gorgeousness of the food. Here's what caught my imagination.

First, our chef, Tom, said he didn't have much time for recipes. He preferred to improvise. However, like any master, he created the conditions to give his improv the best possible chance of success: great equipment, quality ingredients and plenty of time. Above all: 'Taste it. If it isn't right, keep going till it is.'

This is such a perfect metaphor for learner mediators. We are taught a model (the recipe). We try to follow it. If things go wrong or come in the wrong order we can be thrown, feeling as if we are failing. And yet, once we have a few mediations under our belts, or better yet a few hundred, we start to relish the bumps in the road. We give ourselves the best possible chance of success: the right paperwork, the right premises and enough time. Above all: 'Watch. If things aren't right, keep going till they are.'

I believe we consistently underestimate the importance of attention in mediation. So much of our training is devoted to what we say (the 'transmit' function) and very little to what we see, hear, sense, yes, even smell (the 'receive' function). And yet that is our best form of feedback, just like the chef's sense of taste. The last thing we want to do is inhibit new mediators from watching people's faces. I have noticed a tendency among law students to take notes while people talk. Perhaps it's a nervous tick, perhaps a skill that is taught in Law School. But for mediators it is like

looking at the recipe book while the dish is burning – it's not where your attention should be!

My friend Michael Jacobs put this well in a recent e-mail: *'I think we actually 'feel our way' into the right response – much like an artist feels their way into the right colours or notes or phrasing. Obviously this kind of perceptual feeling relies on the senses, but I think its more than watching or listening or smelling or tasting.....'* Here I turn to the work of Antonio Damasio. He proposes a clear link between thinking and feeling, and talks of *'That process of continuous monitoring, that experience of what your body is doing while thoughts about specific contents roll by, is the essence of what I call a feeling.'* (Damasio, *Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason and the Human Brain*, (1994) London: Vintage Books, p.145). So, the most important thing of all is to give complete attention to what is going on in the room, not just in the clients but in ourselves. Then we will know what our next move should be. And if we get that wrong, our clients' faces or our own instincts will tell us.

To return to my cookery metaphor, there was another crucial respect in which Tom hugely increased the odds in his favour: science. While his presentation looked effortless, jaunty even, underpinning it was a deep knowledge of the science of food. Temperatures, textures, mixtures: Tom knew the physics, chemistry and biology of food. His improvisation was informed by a system, so that each move added to the sum of his knowledge. This is much like Donald Schon's vision of the Reflective Practitioner, for whom *'knowing and doing are inseparable'* (Schon, *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action* (1981) Aldershot: Ashgate, p.165).

The parallel for mediators is clear: we owe it to our clients and ourselves to understand the science of conflict. The fields of social psychology, anthropology and sociology are rich with learning. Space doesn't permit even the briefest of summaries of this body of knowledge, but a useful overview comes from Aaron T Beck's *'Prisoners of Hate: the Cognitive Basis of Anger, Hostility, and Violence'* (London: Perennial, 1999). If we understand conflict as a system, than each move, brilliant or disastrous, enhances our understanding.

Going back again to last Saturday, we learned fast because Tom followed a simple method. He told us what he was going to do; he showed us what to do; he gave us a go at doing it; and he came around and answered questions while we did it. Any blunders were quickly corrected, so that we got the chance to embed our new-found knowledge. All of this is a perfect recipe for beginner mediators.

He also hinted at how experts learn. He told us that, when chefs go out to eat, they don't steal dishes, just elements. Then they go back to their own kitchen and combine those elements with their own to make something new. Perhaps this is why it's good to co-mediate, or offer training with others. It's the perfect chance to acquire all the best moves.

There was one final piece of learning for me. Once we had made our faltering attempts at haute cuisine, we carried them through to a bright dining room and ate them with good wine and pleasant company. Who could resist? Why would our mediation clients be any different? I think we often fall down at the final hurdle by not giving them a finishing ritual. This will vary from one situation to another. For some clients any hint of celebration will seem crass and insensitive. But for others a moment to relish hard earned success can just be the delighter that makes it all seem worthwhile. A glass of wine might be perfect. Or maybe just a wee sweetie.

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The graphic features a black background with white text and a circular icon. The icon depicts a group of five stylized human figures, with a magnifying glass positioned over the central figure. The background is accented with horizontal lines in blue and green.

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