
Kluwer Mediation Blog

Peacemakers – Mediation for Youth

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Part of my June was spent preparing for and being involved in a peer mediation initiative in Singapore called Peacemakers. This project was first run in 2010 and had as its purpose the goal of bringing the ideas of mediation and collaborative problem solving to young people. This initiative saw students (aged between 13 to 16) from different secondary schools coming together for 3 days to participate in a program that involved a training workshop and a mediation competition.

In the three years that I have been involved with Peacemakers, it is always heartening to see eager young minds learning the skills of mediation in the short period that we have with them and I am always amazed at the exponential improvement in their competencies over the 3 days. Experienced mediators who have been invited to judge the competition have commented that they have been impressed at the level of skill and occasionally hear reframes that they would have expected to hear only from very experienced mediators.

We've learnt a lot from running this program and I would like to share some of my thoughts in this blog entry in the hope that it might assist others who might also be teaching mediation and collaborative problem solving with young people.

When this idea was first mooted, naysayers doubted whether it was possible to teach mediation to young people and even if it were possible, whether it was do-able in such a short period of time.

In designing the training, we were guided by 4 main principles. First, we were clear that the program had to be interactive and that the students needed to play an active role in their learning and development. That ruled out a straight didactic approach and we chose a workshop format where there would be short sessions of information delivery followed by skill building exercises including mock mediations. Even the information delivery needed to be interactive with demonstrations and responses facilitated from the audience.

Secondly, we were clear that the material had to be suitable for their age group and context. Therefore, we took the material from standard mediation workshops and pared it down to what we considered the essentials. For example, we did not teach students the entire seven elements. Instead, we simplified the model of problem solving to identifying positions, eliciting interests and exploring other options for meeting those interests. Similarly, for the stages of mediation (which can sometimes have 7 or more stages depending on the model one uses), we pared it down to four stages: Opening, Information Gathering, Problem Solving and Closing. We created new role plays which were contextualised for disputes in schools. Generally, these revolved around misunderstandings, pranks, hurt feelings, school work, etc.

Thirdly, we were clear that the training team could not consist of personnel who could not relate to young people and whom the young people could not relate to. We engaged dynamic trainers and coaches from University who had completed the Mediation Workshop at law school. This was a boon as it clearly allowed for bonding and the students were far more receptive to feedback from those they perceived as their peers than from “old fogies”.

Finally, we were sensitive to the issue of motivation. We were concerned that the students would not be sufficiently motivated to apply the material. We conceived of having a competition (yes, we acknowledge the irony and oxymoron of a mediation competition) whereby schools could compete for prizes for the best mediation team and best party. This provided the incentive for students to internalize the material from the programme and as mentioned earlier, to good effect.

To my mind, the benefits of this program are three-fold, all of which fall under the rubric of learning. First, of course, is the learning of valuable skills of conflict resolution at an early age. We have had reports of students from the past two year’s programme who have been actively resolving conflicts in their schools. Considering how much of a challenge it is to get adults to think in a collaborative and non-adversarial manner, it is particularly important to plant these seeds at a young age. With some luck, these seeds will take root and will have knock on effects as they move into adulthood.

Secondly, the students get an opportunity to learn from their peers, both within the same school and across schools. This is important as students from any particular school do not often have the opportunity to interact with students from other schools.

Finally, it was valuable for students to be judged by and given feedback by experienced mediators. This was useful not just from a learning perspective but also contributed tremendously to their confidence and self-esteem. It also brought together practicing mediators from different organizations to share and pass on their passion, skills and experience.

I am sure that much of what I have said will not be new to those pioneers who have gone before us in teaching mediation to young people. We salute those pioneers and hope that what we have done will contribute in some small way to the development of the field. At the very least, it has been my singular honour to have been involved with Peacemakers.

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