

Kluwer Mediation Blog

Reflecting on Reflection...

Sabine Walsh (Sabine Walsh Mediation) · Wednesday, June 26th, 2013

“At these times”, said Dumbledore, indicating the stone basin, “I use the Pensieve. One simply siphons the excess thoughts from one’s mind, pours them into the basin, and examines them at one’s leisure. It becomes easier to spot patterns and links, you understand, when they are in this form.” (From Harry Potter, by JK Rowling, quoted in Moone (2006))

If only it were that easy... but the process of engaging in reflection on our work and learning, for those of us who are not wizards, tends to be somewhat more laborious, and certainly more time-consuming, than that described by Dumbledore. Nevertheless, it is an important part of a mediator’s practice.

While I have always engaged in some sort of reflection on my mediation work, this has often been of a fairly informal nature, ranging from discussions with colleagues over a cup of coffee to lying awake in the middle of the night after, or before, a particularly challenging mediation wondering what it’s all about. Recently though, having been led to reflective writing through other areas of my work, I have come to realise that some more formal, or perhaps structured approaches are necessary in order to make reflection a true learning experience. Having never been particularly fond of or good at diary writing, my first forays into reflective writing and learning journals was a reluctant one. I blamed a lack of time and other priorities though really laziness and an absence of discipline had kept me from sitting down and writing after mediation sessions. I also didn’t really know where to start, and how to make my writing sufficiently reflective, rather than merely an account of who said and did what and whether I felt I was doing a good job.

So, for those of you who might share my hesitance or be wondering whether getting into the habit of reflective writing is a good idea, here are a few thoughts. First of all, I should say that I am talking here about self-initiated reflection, not that required in specific contexts such as supervision, practice management or further education. What, therefore, is the purpose of reflective writing for a mediator? Besides providing us with somewhere to “put” our experiences and our day’s work in order to get it out of our heads, one of the primary functions of reflective writing is to learn from our experiences. Much has been written on this by learning theorists, including Kolb’s discussion of the cycle of experiential learning and Schoen’s reflection on action, and much emphasis is placed on the value of reflective writing in ordering and making sense of disordered and granular experiences, such as mediation, and thus learning from them. In this regard the “cognitive housekeeping” (Moon) that occurs during reflection is helpful in identifying techniques and interventions one might have used in a mediation, exchanges with or between the parties that had unexpected consequences, and in identifying the emotions that might have been in the

mediation room. In order to really learn from the process though reflection requires more than just writing down what happened, what worked and what didn't, though the relevance of these questions should not be underestimated.

It requires a deeper level of reflection, which includes looking again at the theoretical frameworks that inform one's practice, at tools and strategies suggested by others, at interpretations one has put on events previously, and on conclusions one might have come to before. True reflection, and the learning that comes from it, would appear to require a constant re-evaluation of one's own beliefs and theories, and an ability and willingness to critically assess not just what is happening for us now, but also what has happened in the past, and what (if anything!) we have learned from what has happened before.

In practical terms, this can mean thoughts about the deeper reasons why a certain conflict might be so resistant to interventions used, why the parties can't appear to make progress evaluating and re-evaluating all the different dimensions including, very importantly any personal biases on the part of the mediator that might be lurking, unidentified or unacknowledged under the. It can also serve as a vehicle for trying, or failing, to understand why certain things occur in mediation, such as an incident when my handing a party an invoice at the end of a mediation session triggering an outburst of anger at the other party so vicious that it threatened to unravel all the progress made to date. In fact, for me, because I generally favour structure, organisation and clarity, reflective writing has been particularly beneficial in dealing with working in a discipline as unstructured and sometimes, frankly, chaotic as mediation. This is not just because it has enabled me to put my experiences into a written structure, but also because reflective writing itself requires flexibility. Champions of reflective writing actively encourage the "cognitive dissonance" (Festinger) that can occur with learning, that is, the situation that occurs when there is a conflict between current knowledge and new material that is being learned, which can be experienced as uncomfortable. Learning to live with and embrace this dissonance in mediation practice can be rather liberating, as we learn that there is no one correct strategy or intervention and that what we think is the best way to go about our practice may, and indeed change over and over again.

This deeper level of engagement with what mediation is all about will also make one's practice richer and indeed, better as we take the time to think and write about why and how we do what we do, in all the different contexts in which we do it. But therein also lies one of the biggest stumbling blocks to effective reflection – time. The demands of family, other work, and mediation itself in terms of time and intellectual and psychological input, can be too much of a drain on one's energy to then want to sit down and spend an hour writing reflectively. The only solution really is to adapt the process to these challenges and therefore to engage, as often as possible, in "good enough" reflection. One could choose, for example, for a week or two, just to endeavour to identify one's own issues and biases that might be arising. Or could decide to use one mediation every now and then to go back to theory and engage in some conflict mapping or similar analysis. Focusing on one topic or question in depth will often be more valuable than looking at a broad range of issues more superficially. Every now and then though, one needs a good brain dump, to put it crudely. Just getting it all out, including all the conflicting emotions and information that we have to manage, can be as important as analysing the finer details, and certainly better for our psychological health. Now, where did I put my Pensieve???

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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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