

Kluwer Mediation Blog

Creativity and Conflict – A Conference Report

Sabine Walsh (Sabine Walsh Mediation) · Tuesday, September 9th, 2014

The weekend past saw Irish and international conflict resolution professionals gather in the (sunny!) leafy setting of the National University of Ireland, Maynooth for a conference entitled “Where next? Creative Responses to Conflict through Mediation and Restorative Practice”. With an ambitious broad ambit, the conference features no less than 60 speakers, presenting on an enormous spectrum of topics including topics related to mediation techniques and sectors, international and interpersonal conflict, restorative justice and peacebuilding. Key note speakers included international experts such as Michael Lang, Dale Bagshaw, Janine Geske, Jennifer Beer and Michelle LeBaron.

In an unusual structure which, for me, proved to be the most valuable part of the conference, attendees had the option of attending one of several day-long workshops with a selection of experts. Given that I am spending a lot of time instructing trainee mediators in the art of reflective practice at the moment, I chose to attend Michael Lang’s day on the Nine Attributes of Artistry. For those few of you who may not have heard of him, Michael Lang is an experienced mediator, trainer and academic, former Editor In Chief of the Mediation Quarterly and the co-author of one of the seminal texts on reflective practice for mediators, *The Making of a Mediator: Developing Artistry in Practice*, with Alison Taylor.

The workshop began – as all good mediation workshops should – with the distribution of crayons and paper, the theme was creativity after all. Over the course of the next few hours we were guided through a series of discussions and exercises which unfolded the nine attributes of the workshop’s title. One of the most interesting of these was an impromptu role-play based on a case of one of the participants which they were struggling with. The participant was asked to play the role of the client he was having difficulty with, and others then played the other roles. Michael Lang then guided the de-brief. His gentle, thoughtful style provided us with both philosophical reflection on our work, and concrete skills and strategies to further our practices. After a good day’s work, the evening saw the official opening ceremony, a wonderfully warm and funny keynote by Jennifer Beer and a reception.

The conference was opened officially the next morning by the wonderful Mary Robinson, our former president, former UN High Commissioner for Human Rights and currently President of the Mary Robinson Foundation on Climate Justice and UN Special Envoy. Despite having just stepped off a plane from Samoa and having to cope with the fire alarm sounding repeatedly during her presentation, she spoke as passionately and energetically as always about her work and the conflict resolution skills she, in her own admission, had to learn along the way. Her angle on conflict and

climate, particularly, and the role of women was inspirational.

She was followed by plenary sessions featuring Dale Bagshaw, adjunct professor at the University of South Australia, on the future of mediation and Janine Geske, retired Professor of law and Judge of the Supreme Court of Wisconsin on restorative justice. Her stories of victim offender mediation were harrowing and heart-warming in equal measure, and many an attendee, including myself, could have benefited from a brandy rather than coffee during the break that followed. The rest of the day and the following offered an impossible choice in terms of lectures, workshops, TED talks and activities, the highlights of which included a field trip to the Glencree Peace and Reconciliation Centre in the beautiful Wicklow Mountains in glorious weather, massages, mindfulness meditation and of course my own presentation on Rethinking Mediator Education (no false modesty here...!)

I have no doubt that every single attendee, no matter what country or professional background they came from, found sessions that resonated with them and were relevant to their work and took learning away with them. The additional activities and frequent breaks provided ample networking time, (though it is interesting to note that the quality of university coffee has not changed much in the last two decades..) and an opportunity to swap notes with colleagues who attended other sessions. My only regret was not being able to attend more sessions, as there was such a fountain of knowledge available.

I have to congratulate Delma Sweeney and her team at NUIM's Edward M Kennedy Institute for Conflict Intervention on attracting such an extraordinarily high number of the top thinkers and practitioners in this field to the event, and for making such a large amount of experience and knowledge available to the participants. It was an unusual and ambitious idea to organise a conference to cover both mediation and restorative practices, but one that proved thoroughly successful. The two related, yet distinct disciplines gave the conference a bigger audience than it would otherwise have had, who were all able to learn from each other. And at the end of the day, between the dinners, music and traditional Irish ceili dancing, a bit of craic was had too.

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