Kluwer Mediation Blog

The Virtual Training Room – Can Mediation be Taught Online?

Sabine Walsh (Sabine Walsh Mediation) · Saturday, July 4th, 2015

I have to say a huge thank you to my colleague and fellow Mediators' Institute of Ireland Council Member Margaret Considine who delivered the paper on which this post is based for me last week at the World Mediation Summit in Madrid which I was unable to attend. Despite unbearable heat, an airport fire and a non-existent hotel booking Margaret stepped into the breach. Thank you!

"On the Internet, nobody knows you're a dog."

Online learning, also termed "e-learning" or "using educational technology", is a manifestation of distance learning, which has existed for a number of decades. Modern e-learning can mean everything from uploading materials onto an e learning website, to all learning activities being conducted via online platforms. The teaching of mediation and conflict resolution has not been left untouched by the development of this new way of learning. Can something as "hands-on" and practical as mediation be taught online? This post will offer a few thoughts on this question.

In order to do so, I will turn to my own experience in teaching a Postgraduate level Certificate course in Mediation and Conflict Resolution at a university in the Northwest of Ireland, and a number of other professional mediation courses, all of which use e-learning to some degree.

Most courses, particularly university courses, using a learning platform called Moodle, or similar platforms, to co-ordinate many of the administrative, organisational and learning aspects of their courses. Course documents, timetables and materials can be uploaded and any students with access (via password) can access them and download them onto their own computers if they so wish. It also features a discussion board where tutors can post messages, and students can discuss topics amongst each other. Assignments can (and are required) to be electronically submitted by means of being uploaded onto Moodle as well. All communication between students and tutors, and college

administration is done by e mail and students are expected to check their e mail regularly.

Some will also use webinar software. Adobe Connect, a well-known software can be integrated into Moodle or another e-learning platform to ensure that all resources are in one place for students. This software allows a tutor or several tutors to deliver a webinar to students who can attend it live, or watch it at a later date, depending on tutor requirements. Tutors can choose to show themselves via webcam, or their desktops, including PowerPoint slides, video clips or whatever other (audio) visual resources they choose. Students can interact by speaking directly via their webcams and microphones, or by typing in the chat box. This is controlled by the tutor who can moderate interactions so that everyone can be heard and understood. Tutors can also take polls or set quick quizzes for students. The software permits recording of the webinar, and if it is integrated with Moodle, will upload the recorded webinar onto the e Learning platform when it is finished. Discussion between tutors and students, and between students themselves can therefore be facilitated with ease, provided everyone's internet connections are sufficiently strong and reliable.

So far so good; contact can be facilitated between tutors and students, materials can be accessed online and lectures can be attended, and participated in online and discussions can be had. What about the role-plays and other interactive exercises such as, for example, an interactive workshop on conflict styles? Can this software accommodate such activities? In short, yes, in particular if one is to add another online tool to the mix, namely Skype. Skype brings several advantages to small group interactions particularly. Rather than having the tutor as moderator and therefore controller of a session when using Adobe Connect or other similar platform, with Skype each participant participates equally, and can be seen equally on screen. Many of you will be familiar with Giuseppe Leone's Virtual Mediation Lab, which has run very many simulations and trainings in mediating using Skype. The simulation in which I participated involved two co-mediators, one in Berlin and one in Texas, mediating a case between two "parents", one in Belfast and one in Dublin. The simulation was successful, the technology worked, and the learning significant, particularly in relation to the differences between live and online interaction. There is no reason role-plays cannot be carried out in this environment also. In fact, the Virtual Mediation Lab is an online resource in itself. One can watch, for example, a series of simulations of the same case scenario mediated three times by three different mediators using three different styles – facilitative, narrative and transformative. It would have been impossible to show the students three mediations like this in live format, that is, in the classroom, without great expenditure of time and resources, which are fairly scare in Irish universities. Other online-based learning resources, such as the outstanding Mediator Academy (www.mediatoracademy.com), which features interviews with and masterclasses by some of the world's most well-known and experiences mediators, can be offered to students to watch in their own time. Engagement with these resources can be monitored via Moodle and discussions facilitated.

Feedback on role-plays, whether performed by students or pre-recorded and then shown to them, can also be provided using either Skype or a webinar platform. Some students would report finding such feedback easier to give and engage with at a distance rather than when sitting beside a fellow student. More thorough reflection on one's own or others' performance can be facilitated when feedback happens in an asynchronous manner, for example on a discussion board. Re-watching one's own performance as a mediator in a recorded simulation, though usually uncomfortable, is a valuable learning tool which can be difficult to plan in in classroom sessions. Tutorial groups can be run in a similar way.

These tools therefore make live, real-time participation in learning possible, without the necessity for being physically present. The challenge may be, however, to motivate students to "turn up" to online sessions both physically and in terms of participation. Many online learning tools now have mechanisms to monitor attendance and interaction but the student must still take the e-learning components of a course as seriously as the live sessions.

This can be managed easily enough during a blended course such as this one where students meet from time to time. One would often find, however, that more social engagement happens online on the e-learning platform and on social media then happens on the on-site days, particular when students do not live in the same area and the onsite days are filled with classes. Likewise, as regards engagement with the workload, many students, particularly those working full time alongside, will say that the asynchronous element of some aspects of online learning allows them to engage with materials when it is suitable for them to do so, rather than trying to stick to a pre-determined timetable. The attendance at live webinars can of course be a challenge, and ensuring a quiet, undisturbed space in which to engage can be difficult particularly if students have young families. For this reason many students are happy to have some live sessions to go to where they can engage with the tutors and their fellow students, not to mention the materials, undisturbed.
My view therefore on whether one can actually learn real mediation skills using these platforms? Yes…but to a point. No software can ever completely replicate the experience of sitting opposite the parties and observing the nuances of their body language. One could also argue however that no classroom role-play, even if carried out live, can ever simulate the reality of working with parties genuinely in conflict. I have seen too many classroom role-plays descend into giggles, particularly in smaller groups, with students either over- or under-playing roles, or being so uncomfortable "mediating" their peers that the learning experience has been very limited.

The question at the heart of this discussion is whether online learning can replicate, or even replace face to face learning. Of course it can't. It can, however, supplement and enhance it in a number of ways:
1. It can facilitate students in learning at a time and in a way that suits them and their individual life circumstances. This adds value to many students learning experience.
2. Students can be assessed on their engagement with online learning without great difficulty which adds value and legitimacy to this method of learning.
3. Effective online learning does not require large amounts of complicated, expensive equipment or software, or indeed high levels of computer literacy from students
4. Online learning platforms can facilitate the distribution of a much greater range and number of learning materials and resources than can be done physically. Many resources which are exclusively available online can be of enormous benefit to students.
5. Learning is more likely to continue outside the classroom, and more likely to do so in a collaborative, social way as students engage with the more social aspects of the platform such as the discussion boards.

In summary, even when teaching as practical a subject as mediation, the use of educational technology can enhance the range and quality of learning, allow engagement of learners who would otherwise not be able to attend classes, and facilitate collaborative, experiential and reflective learning. If this learning can be blended with some live or face to face sessions to offset some of the drawbacks of students and their tutors not being physically in the same space, one can truly have the best of both worlds.

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