
Kluwer Mediation Blog

New Ways, Old Ways. Preliminary Thoughts on Opportunities for Learning and Change

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Going online is an opportunity to rethink old ways and try out new ones. For mediators, trainers, coaches, and teachers. Professionally the crisis can be an opportunity.

While of course also a threat, with loss of business and income in many sectors, including mediation, facilitation and coaching. The competition for work may become tougher. This may have a good side for the market and for individuals, who may reconsider priorities.

In my teaching for university students I have been given an opportunity to rethink materials and methods, and to spend time preparing in some detail. I find myself preparing the input and the tasks I provide more thoroughly whereas in classrooms I had been relying on stuff I had tried and tested over the years. This leads to clearer advance thinking about concepts and learning goals. I find myself searching for ways to touch base with students, offering them consultations and more assignments with feedback. At the same time students have been asking for more clarity on ideas, expectations and examinations. I am sure that when we go back to classrooms blended learning will play a bigger role than before. I am optimistic that this will improve quality, and I think that for many working in education this is a great opportunity.

In mediation and facilitation, the first thing that happened to my business was cancellations and postponements. I can see this, if I like, as an opportunity to rethink the balance in my working life, to put more time into other work (or of course into the things I do when I am not working). I can see this as an opportunity to rethink what I offer in mediation and facilitation and how I can offer and present it to clients. As a chance to reframe parts of my business. There will be limits and there are clients who prefer to wait until sessions can be held live. There are formats, like the large forums of open space and public meetings that will require some thought and courage to go online, and I am open to trying.

In the online mediations I have done this month, participants seem to have accepted that the technology changes the pace at times, and changes the nature of the interaction. And that it is ok to work within the parameters we have, even when these may seem messy. In an ongoing case with nine partners to a business, no one complained when some participants used cameras and others had none to use, and when some were using the chat function because they did not have a working microphone. Results were achieved – participants seemed to be more results-oriented. This has given me a chance to be focused on aspects of structure, and in some ways to be more distanced. To talk again to my co-mediator about our roles. To think about my role in managing the process.

Designing process gains a new impetus. A new forum creates new ways. These can be no more than preliminary thoughts, and I hope that more practice will bring more learning.

My training for professionals has gone online. In many ways a great bonus, as participants do not have to travel the often long distances to get to one place (they cannot do so at present). Here my focus has been on using break-out rooms effectively, designing reflective tasks that trainees can do together, and keeping plenary sessions short and punchy, rather than giving more trainer input or inviting plenary summary and discussion. For the mediation training here, an unanswered question where I work and in many places around the world is to what degree fully or largely online training meets the requirements of certification. Here too there are opportunities for change.

In my work managing and leading a team, I have been tasked with rethinking how to do this from a distance – this has refigured old questions about roles, expectations, control and communication. For my workplace mediation work, I can be sure that many leaders and teams are asking similar questions.

Expertise, experience and practice can lead to complacency. I can ask myself to what extent the changes that my work has undergone in the past two months have been a challenge to complacency. One thing is for sure: I have gained some time I can use on these questions – the time I would otherwise be spending in transportation around the city, the country, and the world.

Two months is a short time. For any of this to have much lasting effect, two months may not be sufficient. Nonetheless, this has been a time for initial reflection on new ways, and to ask which old ways remain. Fundamental approaches to the process of mediation and training remain, as do beliefs in what they essentially achieve and how, which are carried over to new channels. The rest is flexibility, and one of the biggest learning opportunities I have experienced in a long time. Writing this blogpost has helped me understand that to make the most of it I will have to want to make the most of it.

Time will tell.

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