

**As graduates of the Masters in Mediation and Applied Conflict Studies Program at Woodbury College we are pleased to post this article outlining the philosophy behind our training written by our instructors and colleagues.**

### *The value of extended, integrated mediator education*

Traditional approaches to mediation training rely heavily on mastery of technique, strategy, rules and structure. Some also provide companion workshops in theory, research, ethics and content knowledge for specific types of disputes.

Many, if not most, professional and part-time mediators in the U.S. receive their training through a series of self-selected, intermittent workshops of one to 10 days' duration. This cafeteria-like approach to mediator preparation, where mediators select items à la carte according to interest, has some of the same benefits as buffet food: Freedom to taste as much or as little as one likes, and the opportunity to experiment with new selections without significant investment. This allows "digestion on the run" so that other work and life commitments can continue on center stage.

It is entirely possible for a mediator to become competent, even excellent, through the self-built training program, and there are a number of practicing professional mediators whose consistently high quality of service to others reflects this reality.

That said, we believe the cafeteria approach has noteworthy limitations for the mediator, for the field, and perhaps, in some instances, for clients. Since we have the good fortune to teach mediation in a graduate program that places high value on extended, integrated preparation, we'd like to paint a picture of what's possible when mediators have ongoing opportunities to interact with the same instructors, receive regular, in-depth feedback on progress and are intentionally challenged to develop a deeper understanding of theory and more extensive practice of their craft.

The program at Vermont's Woodbury Institute is based on a three-pronged framework for advancing mediation as the primary profession of the practitioner: (1) develop masterful professionals capable of mediating any kind of dispute in which they're interested, (2) foster heightened mediator self-awareness, and (3) contribute to the credibility of the field through the accomplishment of the first two goals.

## **Developing masterful mediators**

One risk of stand-alone basic mediation training is that new mediators may mechanically replicate methodology, perhaps even zealously embrace it, without a broader context to guide them. The result can be an unintentional indoctrination into a specific mediation “camp” or “method” due to insufficient awareness of other approaches, skills, tools and the values and beliefs upon which they’re based.

When we designed the curriculum for the master’s in mediation and applied conflict studies several years ago, we focused on helping mediators move beyond a recipe of rules, techniques and processes attached to one style or school. Because of the length of the program, students have the time and the depth of learning to make meaningful choices about how they will approach their work not only in ways that satisfy and serve clients well, but which are also consistent with their own deeply-held values and principles.

We designed the program to be anchored by faculty with whom students have ongoing relationships over multiple courses that were deliberately interwoven. This encouraged students to examine their own relationships with conflict, deepen their understanding of the work they’re asking parties to do, and develop ways of knowing and working that aren’t limited by the conflict cultures in which they grew up or practiced in earlier professions. We wanted to give students the time and learning space to look into the mirror held up by instructors and learn from what they see reflected back.

## **Fostering mediators’ self-awareness**

Excellent mediators develop a keen form of self-awareness that creates fodder for continuously improving their work. Such practitioners not only self-reflect deeply on their work, but also know how to translate those musings into greater artistry in practice.

In our experience, this self-awareness begins with the act of unlearning. The deep grooves of behavioral response worn into our students from years of navigating the world of communication, social interaction and conflict do not yield automatically to the introduction of new skills and knowledge. This is particularly true for mediation students who come from another field of origin, such as law or counseling, because old frameworks for problem solving are often deeply ingrained. An extended education program creates the space and mechanisms for students to return to “beginner’s mind,” that state described by

Buddhist philosopher Suzuki with the words, “In the beginner’s mind there are many possibilities; in the expert’s mind there are few.”

We’ve noticed that newly minted mediators don’t really know what they don’t know. Our graduate mediation students often display wonderful confidence and solid ability after 30-40 hours of preparation. With more and regularly occurring instruction, they begin to second-guess themselves and lose that initial glow of confidence. We consider this a good thing! This is when we know they are beginning to unlearn and we’re witnessing the process of a re-wiring of old neural pathways being replaced by new ones, of old problem-solving crutches being set aside.

Over a period of months we observe students’ progress, challenge them, push against what they think they already know and ask difficult questions. We believe that one of the mediator’s most powerful tools is the use of “self as instrument.” To help our students begin to use who they are as one of the tools in their toolbox, we invite them regularly into the hard work of honestly exploring their own interior terrain. This on-going interaction between teacher and student, with the trust of challenge and support that’s built over time, enables this difficult work to unfold in ways that intermittent trainings are rarely able to foster.

## **Building the credibility of the field**

Mediators help parties navigate some of life’s most difficult moments: the dissolution of a marriage or a business, the evolution of a workplace team, decision-making about end-of-life care, negotiations over significant environmental and land issues. Considered in this context, it seems insufficient that the professionals assisting disputing parties in these major life matters may have had the equivalent of a week’s worth of specialized classes (distinct from their professions of origin) to prepare them for such a pivotal role.

We believe that the credibility of our field will advance when professional mediators make in-depth investment in their learning and development, in much the way required in other fields. While formal “school” learning never ensures professional excellence in any field, advanced, cohesive educational programs, along with the selecting and weeding that inevitably goes with them, significantly improve the quality of practitioners in any profession. Law students or counseling students with six credits completed are quite different professionals than ones who complete several more terms of study and practice, regardless of their first profession.

There is also the matter of hybridization—some would label it appropriation—of the mediation field. We believe the field will gain credibility when we abandon the current vogue of identifying practitioners with hybrid professional labels. The labels “attorney- mediator” and “counselor-mediator,” for instance, convey that the roles are somehow linked in practice, and reinforce the notion that the mediator role cannot or should not stand alone.

We invite professionals to name themselves as mediators and mediators only, to assume that role as primary, and to acquire the kind of cohesive preparation worthy of a profession that is pivotal in some of the most important matters and difficult decisions in people’s lives.

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