

CONFLICT MANAGEMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION REPORT

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Conflict Resolver to Conflict Creator: Thoughts on Writing Mediation Roleplays

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Mediators, also known as conflict resolvers, are trained to help disputants resolve conflicts by peaceful means. Because mediators are fervent believers in helping to resolve conflicts, it would seem strange to have a mediator purposefully create them. But creating conflicts for study and practice is one of the best ways to train for resolving them.

I am currently a mediator and assistant case manager for the Mediation Service of NRC in Detroit, Michigan. I am also completing my final semester in the Master of Arts in Dispute Resolution (MADR) Program at Wayne State University (WSU), also in Detroit, Michigan. I was fortunate to gain employment in the field before completing my education, and have found the combination of working in the mediation field and studying it at the same time quite valuable.

Recently I had an opportunity to write roleplays for use during a campus mediation training conducted by Dr. Bill Warters. The roleplays were designed to help prepare the newly emerging student CPR (Campus Peer Resolution) Team based in WSU's Counseling and Psychological Services office. Roleplays are a significant part of the education process. They play a vital role in training mediators to help parties consider positions from the other side. Mediators try to help parties use sympathy and empathy to understand viewpoints other than their own, because sometimes parties are so heated over their dispute that they have lost the ability to apply these qualities in their particular situation. Mediators play a major role in guiding disputants to a place where they are receptive to working with each other instead of against each other. In the process, roleplay actors playing the disputing parties experience encouragement to cooperate and collaborate with each other so that their discussions can be successful. These are all skills learned through roleplays.

Although I had never written a roleplay before, I felt that I knew what a good one should include in regards to details and descriptions. Creating the issues of the dispute so that they seem as real as possible is important. Including the right information and the right amount of information is important. Also, paying attention to gender makes a difference. Since I have been at Mediation Service, I have learned how to recognize when a roleplay has the necessary qualities to make a good dispute. Although the list above is not complete, most of the roleplays that I have worked with have included those factors. However, I had to learn through personal experience that actually writing a good roleplay is hard work.

When I began writing, I reflected on my prior experience in one of the required classes for the MADR program – the Practicum in Dispute Resolution. It is in this class where

students learn the actual skills and techniques of mediation. In previous classes, we studied the theories behind the techniques, but in the practicum, we were able to actually practice the mediator skills. I thought about the roleplays that were used in that class. I was somewhat judgmental about them at the time. I complained that they were too silly, or that they gave either too much or not enough information. I felt that a few of them were not realistic or in some other way did not make sense.

After writing my first roleplay, it did not take long for me to realize that the roleplays from the practicum were actually really good. The first roleplay that I wrote for the project was extremely easy. The words seemed to come to me like magic. My thoughts flowed like running water and the task seemed as simple as child's play. However, every roleplay after that took lots of time, patience and encouragement to develop. I did not have difficulty creating a theme for the roleplays, but what I did find difficult was finding the right combination of words to make the roleplays seem realistic.

I knew that I had to do something to help me balance the information in the descriptions. I did not want to give too much information so that the actors were simply reading the lines; yet I did not want to give so little information that the roleplay had holes in it too big to fill by improvisation. I wanted the actors to be able to read them and, for the duration of the roleplay, to adapt their thinking and attitude to the dispute and feel comfortable taking responsibility for managing it.

Roleplays should be about issues that actually happen to real people in real life. They can range from simple problems dealing with a car repair or store purchase to more diverse issues such as race, dating, or internal family matters. It helped me to pattern the roleplays after real experiences. Whether they were disputes that I was personally involved in or disputes that I was merely aware of, I used them to my advantage. I used them to help me concentrate on gathering just the facts of the dispute with a little bit of feelings and personal thoughts intertwined. I wanted the history of the issue but not so much that the parties could not concentrate on the present and the future. It was my job to write a role-play that was not so rigid that it could not move, yet not so flexible that it could bend, twist and turn with little effort.

I tried to write the role-plays so that the actors can have concrete answers as to what their position is, but to feel comfortable making concessions that deviate from their position if it seems to be in their best interest. I tried not to write role-plays that left more questions than answers as to what the facts and what the ultimate goals are. I tried not to write role-plays that were confusing. I recognize that it is hard enough for experienced mediators to organize a chaotic argument; I did not want to frighten new students – who are possibly wide eyed and excited and usually very nervous at having their first chance to act as a mediator.

As I stated earlier, paying attention to gender is important when writing a role-play. I was encouraged to write them as gender neutral, and at times I found it difficult to do so. Sometimes I had ideas that I created specifically for one gender or the other. But I also understood that limiting the roles to either male or female also limits the projects that it will be useful for.

Role-plays should be written to include a little difficulty between the parties, because these difficult moments are what mediators need to sharpen their skills in creating an

environment of peace and cooperation out of anger and hostility. I have learned that in order to know how to handle disputants while sitting in the mediator seat, it is important for a mediator in training to know what it is like to be a disputant. Participating in a good role-play is a wonderful way to gain this experience.

Although success rates are not the most important factor in being a mediator, I have been successful in helping others walk away from the table satisfied with their decision. I have mediated disputes that ended with the parties saying goodbye with a handshake when they were saying hello with a snarl. I have also mediated disputes that ended with the parties walking out exactly as they walked in. However, since mediating my first session, I cannot recall a single mediation where I have felt uncomfortable with my behavior as a mediator. I owe a portion of my confidence to the role-plays that I have had the fortune of using as practice tools. And in reflecting on how role-plays have helped me to become a skilled mediator, I tried to write mine in such a way that they would be effective practice tools for the upcoming group of conflict resolvers.

I recommend that potential roleplay authors take a look through the searchable roleplay collection found at the Conflict Management in Higher Education Resource Center in the online skill training complex. Link to the [Campus-adr Training Center \(http://www.campus-adr.org/Training_Complex/trainingcenter.html\)](http://www.campus-adr.org/Training_Complex/trainingcenter.html) for ideas and inspiration. The cases I wrote are now included in this collection. Perhaps you might just want to join me as an author and help build the collection!