

CONFLICT MANAGEMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION REPORT

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A Place to Work Things Out

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with an introduction by Samantha Spitzer

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Introduction

The debate about how one should mediate has been going on since the dawn of mediation. Mediators and programs can choose to be, among many other styles, transformative, evaluative, facilitative, settlement-oriented or restorative. A discussion about various mediation styles used by mediators on campus can be found in [Volume 1, Number 4](#) of the Report, in an article by Bill Warters titled [Thinking about Variations in Campus Mediator Style](#).

Of course there are other styles of mediation not mentioned in the Warters article. One that is increasing in popularity is the personal narrative model. This model, also known as the storytelling approach, recognizes that people make sense of their lives by thinking about experiences and relationships in terms of stories. Narrative mediators are interested in how conflict becomes part of a person's life story, and how a person can rewrite a dispute and view it in a more positive manner. Storytelling helps people open up, as individuals are able to explain their life story instead of focusing just on the dispute.

One challenge facing narrative mediators is helping disputants tell their stories fully, and in a way that doesn't just react to the accusations of the other, but rather helps everyone see their lives in a richer and broader context. Also challenging is gaining an understanding of how social structures and inequalities may limit the kinds of life narratives that are possible for members of one group or another.

These kinds of concerns are often raised by the advocates of a social justice perspective, and for good reason. Power and privilege imbalances influence perception in problematic ways. Mediators seeking to find a balance among storytelling, social justice and other more traditional mediation models have their work cut out for them.

A number of campus conflict resolution programs are experimenting with new approaches that work to maintain this balance. [Oberlin College](#) is a good example. The [Oberlin College Dialogue Center \(OCDC\)](#) began operating in Fall 2001 under the direction of Yeworkwha Belachew. To date, 18 campus mediators have helped to resolve more than 20 disputes. Although challenging, the style of mediation used by the OCDC appears to be working well.

Oberlin College

In addition to being on the vanguard of the mediation movement, Oberlin is one of only six institutions using a cutting-edge theory of mediation that incorporates the philosophy and theory of social justice. Based on the idea of personal narrative, or storytelling, this model was developed over the last decade by Leah Wing '84.

"This model has received great interest in the mediation field and is getting some visibility on the national level," said Wing, a private mediation consultant who also directs the campus mediation program at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, where she recently completed her doctoral dissertation on mediation and race.

Along with Deepika Marya, an accomplished mediation trainer who also teaches English at the University of Southern Maine, and Diane Kenty '77, director of Maine's Court Alternative Dispute Resolution Services, Wing provided an intensive, 50-hour training program for Oberlin's new mediators last August.

"The training the OCDC mediators received is fundamentally different from that done in most mediation programs," said Wing. "Two basic concepts have traditionally been used to train mediators in North America and Europe: neutrality, which means that mediators don't take sides, that they're impartial and equally distant from both parties; and symmetry, which is connected to the concept of fairness - giving each person the same amount of time to speak, for example."

Neutrality and symmetry are not universally used as the core values of problem solving, however. The result, said Wing, is that despite honorable intentions, mediation as generally practiced does not serve all people equally.

"Research has shown that more than 70 percent of the time, the agreement reached in mediation is geared toward meeting the need of only one party. Critiques by white women and people of color have illustrated how bias regularly affects mediation practice," she said.

Wing overcomes these problems by viewing mediation as a narrative process rather than a bargaining session or a problem solving session. In her model, the opportunity for both disputants to participate fully is paramount.

"Our goal is to set up the entire process to be as inviting and inclusive as possible for everyone," Wing said.

To accomplish this, a mediation program first must have a diverse group of mediators. Oberlin's team includes 6 faculty and staff members and 12 students of differing ethnic backgrounds. The person who does the initial interview and assigns mediators - at Oberlin that's Belachew - must consider the storytelling needs of the participants. Do they prefer a mediator whom they know, or someone they've never met? Are the disputants most comfortable speaking a language other than English?

Rather than training mediators to be impartial, Wing trains them to be "multipartial," by which she means able to assist both participants in telling their stories. This can result in the mediation becoming asymmetrical - for example, because of differing communication styles, some people need more time to express themselves. Some people need to express anger before they can discuss the conflict. Cultural values assigned to such things as respect for elders and eye contact also can affect how people come into the mediation process.

"We're asking our mediators to pay attention to the cues they get from the participants," Wing said. "We're asking them to think about how to open up the space by the kinds of questions they ask, so both people can tell their story."

She gives an example of a typical roommate conflict. A student comes to the mediation session complaining that his roommate constantly locks him out, even when he is just visiting friends in the next room. The roommate views the situation differently. From a less affluent background, he cannot afford to replace items if they are stolen.

A traditional mediation would focus on achieving a solution to the seemingly simple problem of the locked door. Storytelling's more holistic approach allows the roommate to frame the problem from his perspective, rather than just react to the first student's telling. This method unearths the underlying issues, increases communication and understanding, and improves both participants' awareness of the cause of their conflict, enabling them to devise a "future story" (as Wing calls the final agreement) that's truly mutually agreeable. The storytelling model works as well in homogenous populations as it does in diverse communities like Oberlin, Wing said.

"Actually, even seemingly homogenous populations aren't really homogenous. There will still be issues of class, sexuality, religious differences, athletes versus non-athletes - so many issues can play out besides racial and cultural differences."

Oberlin's new mediators are strong proponents of the model.

"The training made us aware that what's discussed in a mediation is housed within the individuals' experiences, and not housed in our own

experience. In order to understand that, you have to understand society and how groups in our society have interacted," said mediator Albert Borroni '85, director of the Oberlin Center for Technologically Enhanced Teaching and a lecturer in neuroscience.

"The skills we use are similar to those used by traditional mediators, so it doesn't affect how we go about the mediation, but it does affect our level of consciousness," agreed mediator Joya Colon-Berezin '02.

The mediators also say that their work is rewarding, but very challenging.

Anne Siegler '02 co-facilitated a meeting for international students just after the September 11 attacks. "The purpose was to provide a space for people who didn't feel at home or safe, so they could talk about their feelings. It was difficult sometimes because not all international students have the same views."

"Mediation - getting two people to a place where they can actually talk to one another - is really hard work," Borroni said.

"Even though it is a nerve-wracking and difficult task at the beginning, it is also very rewarding to see people own the outcome of the resolution at the end of each process, " Belachew said.