



Training Conflict Resolution Practitioners: the Need for New Methods and Approaches

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Just as no two conflict resolution practitioners are the same, the path they followed to becoming a practitioner will also be different. Indeed, some argue that these differences represent one of the greatest strengths of our field. For example, I've seen numerous students absorb conflict resolution knowledge and theory, internalize the ideas that resonate with them the most and discard the rest thus developing their own very personal and unique style. The result is that a diverse group of practitioners exist with vastly different backgrounds, levels of experience, approaches and areas of expertise.

Many others see this as a weakness, however, and there have been many attempts over the years to further professionalize the field. Part of this professionalization involves issuing credentials to recognize those that have met extensive training and practice criteria. For example, [Civilian Peace Service Canada](#) offers the designation of *Peace Professional*, the [Canadian International Institute of Applied Negotiation](#) offers a designation of *Registered Practitioner in Dispute Resolution* (RPDR), the [Workplace Fairness Institute](#) offers a designation and the [ADR Institute of Canada](#) offers the well-recognized *Chartered Mediator* designation. In all cases, the accrediting organization expects the candidate to meet minimum educational and practice requirements.¹

This article critically analyzes the training of conflict-resolution practitioners by private corporations, non-profit organizations and academic institutions.² In doing so, the strengths of current approaches will be illustrated and ways to improve future training will be identified.

I'll begin by looking at the paths that might lead someone to take a basic 40 hour mediation course. Then, I'll look at some specific training methods noting that aside from the recent use of online learning no major changes have been made over the last 25 years. Next, I'll explore one of the most pressing challenges: the need for more opportunities to practice conflict resolution skills. Lastly, I'll describe other important topics that conflict resolution practitioners should take training on to equip them to face the challenges posed by modern conflicts.

¹ In some cases, there are yearly training requirements as well. For example, roster mediators in BC with Mediate BC need to take 12 additional hours of training each year to maintain their standing.

² It is also worthy of note that these fundamentally different types of training organizations each offer training to those aspiring to enter this field.



The 40 hour Mediation Course

What are the paths that lead someone to becoming a mediator? A lawyer who starts mediating is one way. Another is someone with a background in social services, psychology, counseling or human resources transitions into this field thus adding conflict resolution to their existing area of expertise. The last and perhaps most difficult path is for someone with little to no related background experience to transition into the field.³

Clearly, there are many paths to becoming a mediator but the starting point will likely be the 40 hour mediation course.

More in-depth training in advanced mediation skills and/or a broadening into other important conflict resolution skills such as facilitating, negotiating, building consensus, managing power dynamics, doing workplace investigations and designing multi-stakeholder, multi-issue processes will be achieved in an ad-hoc and piecemeal way. That is, this training will likely be delivered by several different organizations as there is no 'one stop shop' for this training the way a police recruit goes to the police academy for all the basic training he or she needs to be successful in their new role as a police officer.

Moreover, the teaching methods and overall approach of most basic 40 hour mediation training courses is generally the same between organizations. That is, there will be some lectures, group discussions and role-plays that make up the bulk of the training.⁴

From a pedagogical perspective this would seem to indicate that most trainers are following tried and tested training methods. This approach has been used since the mid 1990's when mediation training first emerged in Canada, but it begs the question: is there a need to update our training methods and, if so, how? We will explore this question more in the next section.

The Need for New Training Methods

A common training style that first emerged over 25 years ago continues to be used today by most training organizations. This is unique to the conflict resolution field as other fields have updated their training methods by utilizing new technologies.

³ While this is difficult I'm aware of several people who have made major career shifts towards mediation later in their lives with varying degrees of success.

⁴ Videos and supplementary reading may also be incorporated into the training agenda.



In training the police on the proper use of force and the de-escalation of potentially violent situations, for example, they now use virtual reality simulations where officers are tested on their judgement, situational analysis, and reflexes. Whereas, the most important shift towards using more technology in our field has been the increased use of online learning through platforms such as Zoom, Moodle or Blackboard.⁵

While there are many clear advantages with online training (such as connecting people from across the country and being able to complete the training at their own convenience from their home) there are also some disadvantages.

I have been delivering online training at the graduate level for over the last 12 years and two of the most common concerns I've heard are how to feel a greater sense of connection with fellow trainees and how to practice conflict resolution skills in a virtual environment.⁶

A mandatory Residential Institute (as used by Nova Southeastern University) or a Summer Residency (as used by Royal Roads University) brings online students together for in-person learning and interactions. This is further supplemented by the 'cohort model' which allows an opportunity for students to bond with other members of their cohort as they progress through the curriculum at the same pace.

I've been involved in the design and delivery of both previous examples and the cohort model combined with 2-3 weeks spent together in (and out) of the classroom had a clear advantage in cementing new relationships between students and creating a strong group identity.

The 'hybrid course' also addresses the concerns for forming personal connections and practicing skills in a classroom. I delivered a hybrid conflict resolution course for Nipissing University in North Bay that involved daily work and interactions online every day for 2 weeks followed by a weekend spent in the classroom. Nevertheless, spending 2 days in a classroom is still not nearly

⁵ Plus, the slow yet steady emergence of Online Dispute Resolution (ODR).

⁶ The first online course I delivered was on Conflict Prevention for the MA in Human Security and Peacebuilding at Royal Roads University in 2006 at the request of the late Paz Buttedahl who was the Head of the Program at that time.



enough time to practice these newly-acquired conflict resolution skills. This speaks to the need to have more opportunities to practice applying skills.

The Need to Practice Newly-Acquired Skills

I often state that learning new conflict resolution skills is just like learning any other skill. For example, if one wanted to learn to play golf one would get a coach or trainer and then log many hours on the driving range or putting green. So, part of developing and perfecting new skills involves practice, practice, and more practice! However, there are very few opportunities for people to practice conflict resolution skills in a professional setting where they can receive timely and constructive feedback.

One innovative, new model to follow is the [CoRe Conflict Resolution Society](#) one in BC where they recently organized 2 days of mediation role-plays to create an opportunity for people to practice applying their skills. However, even the best designed role-play still cannot match the true complexity and richness that comes from working in a real-life setting.⁷

One model that combines the application of new skills in a real-life setting along with on-the-job training comes from training Personal Support Workers. In training Personal Support Workers, some colleges are using ‘living classrooms’ where students learn while on the job and this could be another valuable model to follow.⁸

The problem with applying this method to conflict resolution training, however, is that we don't have very many centres that can serve as training locations.⁹ This is because the field has organized itself into mostly private mediators operating from their home offices. Major peacebuilding and conflict resolution organizations, for example, such as the Pearson Peacekeeping Centre and Peacebuild have closed or greatly reduced operations. Indeed, if one were asked to name 5 major conflict resolution organizations across the country that are

⁷ The real learning from role-plays comes from the debriefing session and in order to be effective the facilitators need to dedicate ample time in the agenda for doing this and carefully plan the best way to structure the debrief in order to generate key lessons.

⁸ See Algonquin College in the Ottawa Valley, for example, where students work at the nearby Bonnechere Manor as part of the program.

⁹ We need to keep in mind that most individual mediators may not have the quantity of cases nor the capacity to host students.



explicitly focused on offering conflict resolution services they would probably be hard pressed to do so. So, a major concern right now is a lack of locations for students to do internships or practicums.

Over the last few years the Canadian International Institute of Applied Negotiation has hosted students from many different academic programs from both Canada and the USA. I have been involved in this work in different capacities and learned that to provide a meaningful experience for the students you need to set them up with a good project and be prepared to support them and provide oversight plus close guidance for the duration of that project. In almost all cases, this leads to a very rich learning experience for the students and has assisted us as the host organization with fulfilling our mission. In other words, if done right it can be a win-win!

However, since it is very unlikely that several new learning centres will be created soon we need highly-skilled or senior mediators to mentor and guide junior colleagues in the same way someone apprentices with a Master Carpenter to learn that trade.¹⁰ We can encourage mediators to do this as a professional courtesy as we work towards finding ways to further institutionalize this. To this end, perhaps mentoring and/or coaching can become part of the requirements of receiving one of the professional designations mentioned earlier in this article?

Experiential learning via practicums, placements, field trips and immersive simulations also addresses most if not all the previous concerns and there are some organizations that specialize in this. For example, the [Forge Center for Peacebuilding and Humanitarian Education](#) offers a 2-day peacebuilding simulation which aims to closely match the conditions someone might face if working overseas in a humanitarian camp. Whereas, the UPeace [Centre for Executive Education](#) in Costa Rica organizes educational field trips there for peacebuilding students.

The Need for Training on Other Topics

Aside from the specialized training mentioned earlier, we need to ask if there are any other major topics that currently aren't being covered?

¹⁰ Some of my deepest and most profound learning experiences have been due to having a senior person in the field coach or mentor me and I'm eternally grateful to these dedicated, caring people for taking the time to share their wisdom with me. I, in turn, now also do this for others.



We need to update our training topics to match the realities of current conflicts. Current conflicts are complex, inter-twinned, costly and often embedded in a deeper structural or policy environment that can work against their resolution. Because of this, it is almost always better to prevent conflicts before they occur.

Moreover, stalemated or intractable conflicts can often only be shifted towards resolution when the political actors involved are sufficiently motivated to take helpful actions. Likewise, often there is ample early warning that a new conflict is emerging and taking early responses to prevent the escalation of the conflict requires generating sufficient levels of political will. Thus, the need to influence political actors is a major aspect of preventing and resolving conflicts at three levels (community, national and international).¹¹

Based on these current realities, some topics that should be covered as part of the ‘basic training’ for all conflict resolution practitioners includes:

- Conflict Prevention
- Critical Thinking
- Problem-Solving¹²
- Political Advocacy
- Project Design, Monitoring and Evaluation (DME)
- Policy Analysis

Additionally, I’d add that training should emphasize teamwork, self-discipline, curiosity, how to work under pressure, the need for flexibility/innovation and cross-cultural sensitivity.

In other words, future training needs to be both deeper and broader to be more reflective of the realities of modern conflicts.

¹¹ Of course, it is also worth mentioning that influencing outside actors to help shift a conflict towards resolution is sometimes required in family mediations as well.

¹² Games of strategy might be one way to help foster critical thinking and problem solving. I’m not aware of any that have this aim and would welcome feedback from readers if they are aware of any.



Conclusion

Some argue that current training methods are acceptable. Under this model, those that want to incorporate more Conflict Resolution skills into their current career or those that want to make this their primary career will find their way through the maze of training opportunities that already exist. They will likely start with a 40 hour mediation course and then building on their own interests and aspirations they will possibly take other additional training in an ad hoc manner.

On the other hand, I assert that we need to update our training methods. These updates to our training approaches will help build the other skills that are needed to be effective plus they will utilize innovative, new ways to develop and practice these skills.

