Peer Support Sessions – Learning & Growing

The University of Strathclyde Mediation Clinic (USMC) provides Peer Support Sessions (PPS) as a forum for mediator learning, a means to interrogate our experience of mediation and develop as practitioners. We are each encouraged to articulate what we seek to learn from presenting a case in advance of the session. That creates a useful focus, anchoring the reflective process to individual needs and making clear to supporting practitioners where their facilitation – questions, summaries and frames – should be aimed. Many USMC members are graduates or students of the university masters' programme in mediation who continue to practice with the clinic post-qualification. This offers an unparalleled opportunity to engage – critically and systematically – with theory and practice and thereby develop as mediators.

The overarching purpose (meta theory) of reflection in general, and PPS in particular, is the development for each of us of a Personal Theory of Practice (PTP).

Personal Theory of Practice is a term coined by Argyris and Schön – two social psychologists who wrote extensively about professional development and reflective practice. A theory of practice enables us to understand the frames we use as practitioners to guide our decision making in response to the interaction playing out in mediation. Professional development is typically measured by accrediting bodies as attendance at CPD sessions – the counting of inputs. An ability to clearly articulate a PTP is a measure of output, a better indication of development and a hallmark of the professional mediator.

In our early development as mediators, we focus on embedding what was acquired in basic training, learning good habits, recognising patterns in mediation and then selecting appropriate techniques and interventions. There appear to be right and wrong ways to approach mediation and we seek to emulate more experienced practitioners. Valuable as such learning is, we become aware that mediators do not respond uniformly - there is clearly a personal element to practice. Moreover, we begin to recognise a tension between espoused theory – what we learn in foundational (40 hour) training – and theory-in-action, what we actually do in the mediator's chair.

Developing a PTP draws on theory to examine practice, to build an updated theory which in turns informs and shapes our practice. Thinking about practice in the light of theory acquired on the masters' course is a useful point of departure. Unpacking the theory behind the model learned in initial training is a helpful first step. Take for example the purported clash between a problem solving and relational approach to mediation (Wall and Kressel, 2012). What does our knowledge of mediation models tell us? How does our experience of mediation - particularly in different fields - inform us? Where do our personal values and beliefs lead us?

Professional learning has been conceptualised as taking place at two levels: single loop and double loop (Argyris, 1991). Reflection, centring on <u>what</u> and <u>how</u> questions, operates as single loop learning, *'problem solving, identifying, and correcting errors'* (Cunliffe, 2004: 412). Double loop learning involves <u>why</u> questions - testing assumptions - and <u>who</u> questions - understanding the values, beliefs and expectations we each bring to the table (Poyntz, 2018). With the support of fellow practitioners, it is possible to explore both levels in a PPS.

We all have a PTP - and operate within it - even those who rely on intuition. As Kressel observes (Kressel, 2013), we start with simple personal schema and progress (hopefully) to complex schema. The former are less stressful - 'just follow the process' - the latter are richer but more challenging as there are many more options. A PTP is always a work in progress - theory moulding practice, moulding theory. The path to building a PTP commences with an awareness we operate under one.

Approaches to building a PTP

Learning is best facilitated by being unsettled, when we are obliged to bypass the shibboleths of practice - aka espoused theory. Here are some exercises that might prompt that felicitous state.

Metaphors

We use metaphors frequently to explain or frame things when we communicate with others. They encompass a wealth of meaning that is fruitful to unpack. For instance:

> *What metaphor do you use to explain mediation (or the role of yourself as a mediator) to a participant with no previous experience? How does that sound to the rest of the reflective group? Unpack the meaning behind your choice. Would you use the same metaphor in a different field of mediation?*

> *Would you describe mediation as a facilitated negotiation or a conversation? Might your choice of descriptor be contingent on context? What does this choice reveal about your view of the social interaction that takes place in mediation?*

Underlying Assumptions

Do we have the same goals and objectives in mediation as our colleagues? A research paper (Zarankin et al 2014) explores this subject by focusing on four topics.

> *The purpose of mediation*

> *The goals of mediation*

> *The role of the mediator*

> *Criteria for success*

Researchers developed a questionnaire exploring these topics which was used to survey mediators individually. However, these questions can also be used as a group reflective exercise – particularly with a diverse group – to unearth differences which can prompt learning. Do the differences arise from context – say family v commercial mediation – or from our personal schema?

You can of course invite the group to complete the questionnaire in advance and then discuss when you assemble. What might be more fun is to pick a selection of questions and pose these – in turn – when gathered. Have participants line up according to their answer – from one to six – and then have a facilitator quiz them (individually but gently) as to their reasoning. When complete offer the group the chance to change their answers.

Critiquing Theory

Does theory line up with our own experience of practice? Taking a research paper and examining it critically can sharpen our own reflections – particularly where we might disagree with their findings. For instance:

> *In a study of community mediators Stokoe (2016) finds that mediators formulate solutions and then use Solution Focused Questions to guide participants to this end.*

> *Rothman (2014) in the Reflexive Mediator rejects the notion of neutrality – 'in many ways the field of mediation has been built on the ideal of a neutral, objective third party, what is the field without it?'*

Do sweat the small stuff

We often focus - in reflection - on the grand moments in mediation - the seemingly intractable problems, the dramatic breakthroughs. However, we shouldn't overlook learning from those micro moments that occur. Why did I turn to one party and not the other? Why did I choose to intervene (or not)? Who did I call upon to speak first? What do these choices suggest about our personal schema?

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