

Carrie Gallant

# Theatre for Mediators



**T**herein resides the essence of theatre: in the human being observing itself.

*The human being not only “makes” theatre: it “is” theatre.*

Augusto Boal, *The Rainbow of Desire*

Creativity is an essential component of mediation and any “problem-solving” endeavour. A daunting task for mediators can be to inspire parties in conflict to be creative. A mediator who practises creativity will arguably be better equipped to inspire creativity in the parties. In *The Dynamic of Mediation: Is Creative Genius the Key to Successful Mediation?*<sup>2</sup>, Stephen Goldberg said:

Creativity is a very important mediation skill and can be of great aid in bringing about successful dispute resolution. Unfortunately... there are not enough highly creative people to make mediation successful as a widely utilized process across the disputing universe.

Well, assuming Goldberg is right—and some would argue he exaggerates—how do we enhance the creativity of mediators and conflict-resolvers?

Creativity experts suggest that play and breaking routines are essential to

learning, growth, and change. Some experts suggest that true creativity comes to a professional once he or she has developed the core competencies and is now able to “play” with his or her skills and knowledge to find creative solutions.

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Diane Ackermann notes in *Deep Play* that “play...is our brain’s favourite way of learning and maneuvering...it gives us the opportunity to perfect ourselves.” At CreativityZone we believe creativity can be learned both during and after competency development and should be practised regularly. Flexing your creative muscles keeps them in shape!

Theatre games and tools hold particular relevance for mediators. Theatre, in all its forms, is about stories, usually constructed around a conflict, with a crisis and generally some form of conclusion. Theatre games and tools provide actors with opportunities to play with and enhance their skills for performance.

Theatre games and tools in mediation training likewise encourage

play and skills enhancement and, within mediation, help retain a focus on the stories and the conflict, rather than on arriving at conclusions that otherwise may be artificially dictated by rules and decision-making processes.

Many of the lesser known forms of theatre lend themselves particularly well to mediation training and practice: improvisational, forum, and playback theatre and sociodrama each offer a range of tools and exercises that may be used in mediation in various ways, either for training, as a warm-up for the mediator, or within mediation as a tool for enhancing communication between the parties or generating ideas for resolution.

As a learning tool, theatre games and exercises provide a way to practice and develop greater facility and flexibility with mediation skills, enabling the mediator to dance fluidly and make 180 degree turns with ease.

Other experts in mediation and negotiation are beginning to explore the relationship of theatre to mediation. Robert Benjamin has examined mediation through a theatre lens, describing “mediation as theatre and negotiation as performance art” (2001).

The October 2005 issue of *Negotiation Journal* included a special section on improvisation and negotiation

and mediation, drawing from a conference at the Harvard Project on Negotiation. Our exploration at CreativityZone has been in researching the connections and in utilizing theatre tools in our teaching, training, and mediation.

**Improvisation:  
Expect the Unexpected!**

Mediation, like improvisational theatre, is a largely unscripted and somewhat unpredictable experience. Like improvisers, mediators are performing a role and act and react according to the actions of the other “players.”

Preparation is essential to both: for the mediator—to know the identity of the parties, to anticipate the issues, and be prepared for the unexpected, and for the improviser—to know the other players and to have practised his or her skills through exercises and games with the other players prior to the performance.

Many of the exercises and games are also incorporated directly into

performance. The keys to both improvisation and mediation are practice, practice, practice.

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Many of the skills of an improviser parallel the skills of a mediator. Three important parallel skills are “listening,” “building on offers,” and “spontaneity.” The basis of improvisational theatre performance and games is the “Yes, And” stance. The focus is on recognizing an offer and accepting it. All offers are accepted: “Yes.” The creative idea is revealed by building upon the offer: “And.”

Listening skills are important to an improviser to recognize an offer. Spontaneity is the essence to building

on the offer—which is what follows the “And” and generates the creative idea. Spontaneity in improv often leads to hilarious results; spontaneity in mediation can lead to the generation of a creative idea that would otherwise not have arisen. Improvisers rely on dozens of games and exercises to develop and practise these skills.

**Forum Theatre:  
Show Us What You Want**

Forum theatre and its related forms were developed by Augusto Boal in Brazil during the 1960s, where he experimented with various forms of theatre. Boal began by developing a process for audience members to stop the action in a play and suggest different actions for the actors, who would then carry them out.

In one seminal performance, a female audience member was so frustrated and angry that the actor in the scene could not understand and carry out her suggestion; Boal invited her

onstage to show what she wanted—and the “spect-actor” was born.

Boal discovered that when audience members became spect-actors, they became empowered to not only *imagine* change, but to actively *practise* the change; then the entire audience is able to reflect collectively and become empowered to generate social change.

The result is a dialogue about the issues that can lead to new understandings, an examination of the alternatives, and a “rehearsal” for real-life situations. In a sense, forum theatre **is** a form of collaborative dialogue in practice, although its essential purpose is not about arriving at a solution.

Many of the exercises within forum theatre include image-making and using the body to sculpt images. Some exercises also overlap with playback theatre and sociodrama exercise. In the context of mediation, image theatre and auto-sculpting can be utilized to depict images of conflict or emotional states. Difficulty expressing emotions is often experienced by one party or another during mediation; having the expression received without judgment or defensive reactions is also a challenge.

Shaping one’s body into a depiction of conflict, the impact of conflict, or an emotional state allows the “speaker” to *show* what perhaps he is unable to *say* and allows the viewer to *see* what perhaps she is unable to *hear* in the spoken words. And rather eloquently, sometimes, the viewer sees something the sculptor did not consciously intend, but can admit was present and important.

We have used both improvisational and image theatre techniques in the university classroom and professional workshops and are beginning to use them in mediation, as well. Some exercises lend themselves well to certain contexts; the image and sculpting exercises appear to facilitate communication particularly well in family and child protection contexts.

There is a vast array of further exercises, games, and tools that can be explored by mediators who wish to enhance their creativity and to flex their creative muscles. If you would like more information or to enquire about creativity workshops, please contact CreativityZone at [info@creativityzone.ca](mailto:info@creativityzone.ca). ▲

- <sup>1</sup>. Paper presented at the 1996 World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO) Conference on Mediation.

## Resources

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