

Learning About Learning: The Value of "Insight"

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Insight mediation is based on the philosophy of Bernard Lonergan. This article articulates Lonergan's assumptions about learning and how they can be applied to mediation.

The question of "how to teach so it takes?" was raised by the organizers of the Theory to Practice II conference; it caught my interest and I knew I wanted to participate in these discussions when invited to attend. The question has long been a part of my teaching life, and recently it has become a focus of research inquiry. Driven by a need to help my students expediently and efficiently become better mediation practitioners, I wanted to know more about what goes on in the process of mediation. I also felt I needed to know more about how people learn. Helpful to me in both these projects has been the work of Canadian philosopher Bernard Lonergan.¹ This short article sets out to introduce the reader to Lonergan's theory of how we come to know and its connection to the field of conflict studies.

My learning about learning has focused on how learning occurs in a mediation context rather than learning in the classroom or other educational setting. If you think about it, the process of mediation is a process of discovery and learning. As mediators, we endeavor to learn about the nature of the dispute and the parties. We want to know what is going on between the parties; in particular, we want to know each party's cares and concerns in an effort to delink one person's cares from necessarily being a threat to the other. Similarly, we are involved in helping each party learn about themselves and the other party, to enable them both to find a way to best resolve the situation. Thus the more we know about how we learn, the more we

NOTE: *I would like to thank Ken Melchin for his review of this paper and his suggestions for improvement.*

understand ourselves. Further still, the more we learn, the more we can increase parties' understanding of the conflict dynamics in which they find themselves. When parties learn, the nature of the conflict inevitably changes.

It is Lonergan's concept of *insight* that has proven to be most useful to me in coming to understand what goes on in the mediation process. In fact, I now refer to the model of mediation that I ascribe to and teach as "insight mediation" (Picard, 2002). Before going into the concept of insight, it is useful to outline Lonergan's four levels of cognition. I should say at the outset that I have only recently come upon this particular philosopher and that I am by no means an expert in his work. Much of what I have come to know and understand has been from my good friend and colleague Kenneth Melchin, who is a recognized Lonergan scholar.²

Lonergan suggests that the act of coming to know has four levels: (1) experiencing, (2) understanding, (3) judging, and (4) decision. Level one, *experience*, is about getting the "data" for the operations of understanding and judgment. It requires that we immerse ourselves in such experiences as seeing, hearing, feeling, imagining, and remembering. Level two, *understanding*, is about getting insights and inverse insights that either answer our questions or set our questioning on a new track. Here, our goal is to find answers to the "What is it?" question. We have an insight when, for instance, we hit upon the combination of train routes that will take us to our destination; we have an inverse insight when we discover that a lost object was never lost—it was lent to a friend, and our task changes to one of tracking down the friend.

Level three is *judgment*. Here, we reflect on the insights and inverse insights and make judgments verifying whether they are correct. This level asks the "Is it so?" question. We check out the travel route at the station, only to discover that we have been working with an out-of-date schedule, so we now must begin again to find the best connection. We call around to our friend and track down the lost object. Level four, *decision*, is where decision and action take place. It involves reflecting on whether we will follow through on our understanding and judgment, taking responsibility for ourselves and our actions, deciding and then acting. Here we make the decision to embark on our journey, or to retrieve the lost object. It is interesting to note that Lonergan's philosophy is not principally a set of ideas that can be learned from reading a book or listening to others; rather, it is a discovery process much like that of reflective practice,³ where we observe and come to understand ourselves in our day-to-day actions.

At the core of Lonergan's philosophy is the invitation to pay attention to our acts of insight. The best way to describe insight is that it "transforms you quite suddenly from being stupid to being brilliant" (Flanagan, 1997, p. 16). It is the "a-ha" that arises when we hit on the answer to a puzzle or a question. Insight occurs in the ready mind, and what readies our mind is a question, a wondering. Wondering is wanting to understand, wanting to catch on. Before the insight, we cannot imagine the answer to a problem; after the insight we can neither imagine nor remember the inability to understand. Insight does not come out of the blue; it follows on a question as the answer to a question, and it brings together and integrates elements in the data of experience. Hitting on insight often requires getting out of one line of questioning and into another. This happens when we hit a dead end, go round in circles, or get nowhere with our questioning. Hence, we search for new clues by trying another tack, asking a new type of question, and paying attention to a different set of data. Getting the insight that "we can't get there from here" causes us to disengage from one line of questioning and move to another. This discovery is the special type that Lonergan calls inverse insight. It is inverse because rather than hitting upon a solution, it recognizes that a particular line of questioning does not work. It discovers that intelligibility does not lie in the direction we have been going but somewhere else (Flanagan, 1997).⁴

So, what does all this have to do with mediation? The goal of mediation is to shift the direction of a dispute to make space for collective action. This involves probing the underlying concerns that are driving the conflict and helping disputants understand and acknowledge their own underlying interests and those of the other party. To do this work, mediators use a range of questioning, listening, and wondering strategies. They develop a hunch as to what concerns might lie behind a statement, and they continuously reframe and reflect disputants' words and ideas. Curiosity draws them to search for insight into what it is that people care about, what concerns them, what their values and feelings are, and what drives their conflict. More important than this, they are in search of strategies to help the disputants themselves find insight into what really matters to them, what really matters to the other person, and how the two might be pursued together. Thus the mediator's primary role is one of learning and helping others to learn more about the dispute that involves them.

Lonergan's work has helped to identify and articulate more fully the tasks of a mediator as he or she works through the mediation process. In the insight model, a mediation has five stages: (1) introducing the process,

(2) identifying the issues, (3) exploring the interests, (4) generating options to meet interests, and (5) reaching agreement.⁵ In a typical mediation, it is in the third stage (exploring the interests) that most of the work is done. Once the process is clarified and the issues are identified, the mediator launches into the work of exploring and clarifying the interests, concerns, cares, and values that lie behind the issues and sustain the conflict. When stage three is completed successfully, disputants can often move quickly and easily through stages four and five. Consequently, the lion's share of the mediator's work is to help the disputants work through this exploration stage. To attain the objectives of the third stage, the mediator performs seven tasks⁶:

1. Gathering data by probing for information on how each party views and experiences the conflict situation (discovery at the level of the presenting problem); this is the "What is going on?" question

2. Discovering how each party feels about the conflict situation—the "How do you feel about what is going on?" question

3. Probing for what each party's feelings are about (getting insight at the underlying problem level), the "Where do these feelings come from?" question, as well as "How are present feelings linked to past experiences and anticipated outcomes?"

4. Eliciting each party's reaction to the other's cares and concerns and discovering how they might be threatening ("deeper insight"); the "What are you hearing as being important to X and how does that threaten what matters to you?" question

5. Seeking to delink the perception that the other's cares and concerns must necessarily be a threat to their own ("inverse insight"), which opens space for parties to appreciate what the other cares about (I can care if it doesn't threaten me)—the "Is your objection more about issue Y than issue X itself?" question

6. Inviting participants to suggest possible strategies for pursuing what is important to them together, the "What would make it possible for each of you to get what you need?" question

7. Eliciting reactions from parties to verify if a proposed strategy meets both sets of cares and concerns—the "Will that suggestion meet your needs as well?" question

Following along with Lonergan's framework, it is easy to see how experience (getting the data) and understanding (getting insights and inverse

insights) fit within the mediation process. I now turn to the remaining two levels of cognition: judgment and decision. Mediators not only have understanding and insight; they also make judgments. A mediator's judgment, however, does not try to evaluate the disputants' facts or values; rather, it is about whether the parties themselves get the insights and whether these insights ring true to the parties' own feelings and experiences. Here is where the disputants' own learning is crucial for the mediation process. Mediators want to confirm whether the parties have correctly understood their own concerns and those of the other. If this happens, the mediator can make the judgment that she has got it right.

Mediators have experiences, find insight, and make judgments in two areas: in matters of fact, and in what Lonergan would call matters of value. By values, he is referring to the whole cluster of things that matter to people—the things they care about. This is where models of mediation part ways in terms of emphasis. Evaluative outcome-oriented models attend to matters of fact, so the operation of experience is about collecting factual data. Relational models privilege matters of value; therefore the mediator is curious about the disputants' experience of feelings. To say this another way, “feelings are intentional responses to values” (Melchin, 1998, p. 33) and a mediator works to discover what parties' feelings are about—what really matters to them. This clarifies the values that are driving peoples' actions to both parties. Very often, parties are not fully aware of their own values; nor are they aware of how the values have an impact on the conflict situation. Once mediators attain some understanding, they test their ideas, assumptions, and hunches to see if they ring true to the disputants. This involves the parties' learning about themselves and each other.

The next step involves delinking. Here the question is whether what one party cares about is necessarily a threat to the other. The delinking process addresses the “Is it so?” question for the mediator, and this is a question for judgment. However, for the parties this delinking involves that special type of insight called the inverse insight. Mediators' continued curiosity and probing helps parties find inverse insights that enable them to grasp that the other's values need not necessarily pose a threat to their own. Here is where the magic of mediation takes place, as the disputants become genuinely curious and interested in what matters to the other and how they can both pursue their concerns together. This is where they join forces in the learning process. Their questioning shifts direction until they get insights and affirm judgments that make sense of both persons' experiences.

Finally, parties are left with the question of whether and how they are going to follow through on what they have judged to be valid. They have reached the fourth level of cognition, that of decision, and they must decide whether to carry through on their judgment and commitment. Here, they work out action strategies and agree on how each will proceed. When this is complete, the process of mediation ends to everyone's satisfaction.

In the insight model, a mediation is successful when the disputants get insights and inverse insights—in particular, when they experience a shift from a stance of mutual fear and hostility to one of mutual interest in each other's cares and concerns. The goal of the mediator is therefore to help the disputants experience these insights themselves. In an important sense, we can say that the mediator's role here is to help facilitate learning in the disputants. When things go well—when this learning takes—everyone feels a dramatic change in the course of the conflict.

The mediator's most powerful learning-facilitation tools are questions: probing, reflecting, wondering, problem-solving, linking, delinking, reframing, empowering questions. Questions help direct the parties' attention to things that may have escaped notice. But because the mediator offers these possibilities to the disputants as questions rather than statements, power over the process remains in the hands of the parties themselves. It is they who have to hit on the insights, and insight can never be managed.

Questions that elicit parties' reactions to the other's cares and concerns are particularly significant learning-facilitation tools for mediators. Similarly, delinking questions offer possibilities for disputants to try on new perspectives on things that previously would only have evoked feelings of fear. In both cases, the questions seem to facilitate learning by inviting parties to get involved personally in new ways of thinking and feeling about things.

How, then, can mediators be trained to play this role of facilitating insight learning? Lots can be said here, but for the moment I offer a couple of ideas. The first involves experiential mentoring. Trainers need to know how to mediate well, and they must know how to construct role-play and establish a learning situation where students experience firsthand these moments of insight and inverse insight. Students need to feel the dynamics of the mediator's own search for insight and his or her strategies for facilitating insight learning in the parties. Trainers need to be able to construct a role-play situation simple enough yet real enough for learning mediators to experience success. They must also identify and replay moments when

student's interventions evoked moments of insight and inverse insight in the disputants.

The second idea involves strategies for modeling good questioning. When mediators question well, their questioning evokes the engagement of the parties in new ways of relating to the concerns of the other. Questioning needs to be both challenging and empowering; mediators have to learn how to formulate good questions aimed at facilitating insight learning in the disputants at the same time as they are seeking their own insight into the dynamics of the conflict. This is not easy, and there is no substitute for successful practice in an environment where trainers are constantly tuning the learning toward the students' own developmental path.

Mediation is a process of learning that is enhanced by our understanding of how we and others learn. All of the presenters at the Theory to Practice II conference spoke implicitly—or fairly explicitly—about the limits of input-output models of learning. In this short article, and in the spirit of advancing our ability to “teach so it takes,” I have tried to show how Bernard Lonergan's levels of cognition, in particular his concept of *insight*, help us learn about learning.

Notes

1. Lonergan (1904–1986) was a Jesuit priest who addressed questions regarding philosophy, theology, and economics; however, his work is not well known outside of the fields of philosophy and theology. His book *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992, originally published in 1957) analyzed the role that questions and insights play in human understanding and knowing. Other writings include *Method in Theology* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990, originally published in 1972) and *Understanding and Being*, edited by E. A. Morelli and M. D. Morelli (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990, originally published in 1980).

2. See for example, *History, Ethics, and Emergent Probability* (Ottawa: Lonergan Website, 1999, original 1987); *Living with Other People* (Ottawa: Novalis, 1998); and *Ethical Deliberation in Multiprofessional Health Care Teams*, edited with H. Doucet and J.-M. Larouche (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 2000).

3. For readings on reflective practice, see Lang, M. and Taylor, A. *The Making of a Mediator*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 2000; and Schön, D. A. *The Reflective Practitioner*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1987.

4. Kenneth R. Melchin, professor of theology in ethics at Saint Paul University, Ottawa, unpublished papers and conversation, 2002. (www.lonergan.on.ca/interviews/melchin.htm)

5. Although I do not see mediation as a linear process, I have found that mediators generally need to go through all five stages to arrive at mutually acceptable outcomes. Often, disputants move back and forth among the stages until the goals of all have been met. For more information on this model, see Picard (2002).

6. This list of seven mediator tasks represents preliminary findings. It was drawn from an examination of a videotaped simulated mediation of a workplace-based conflict done at Carleton University, Ottawa. The mediation followed the insight mediation model, where I was the mediator. My research collaborator, Ken Melchin, and I formulated some of the characteristic features of the insight model. This study is still in the exploratory stages.

References

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