# The Mediator as Conductor Part 2: The narrative symphony *The Second in the series The Mediator as Conductor*

## David Mitchell If a mediator is to be a conductor, then there has to be a repertoire of techniques, akin to symphonies and musical works by composers. I have chosen five pieces to illustrate this concept, which will be published over successive issues of *Pulse*.

**Follow on articles in the Mediator as Conductor series (parts 2-6)**

2. The narrative symphony : *Lord of the Rings (Stephen Oliver)*

**3.The neuro-linguistic programming (NLP) focus on the senses: *The Ride of the Valkyries in Apocalypse Now***

4. The Transactional Analysis (TA): *trio divertimento for violin,  
 cello and viola*

5. The Emotional Intelligence (EQ) experience: *The Organ Symphony (*Saint-Saëns*)*

6.The Compassion arrangement: “Piu Jesu” from Lloyd Webber’s *Requiem* sung by Sarah Brightman and Paul Miles-Kingston

**The Narrative Symphony applied to Mediation**

Musical connection: My favourite narrative symphony is Stephen Oliver’s *The Lord of the Rings* , commissioned by the BBC for its dramatisation of Tolkien’s masterpiece.

**The mediatee’s hope**

If I ask you for help

Will my words move you

To listen

To hear

To understand

To accept

So my healing begins   
 - David Mitchell

‘We dream in narrative, day-dream in narrative, remember, anticipate, hope, despair, believe, doubt, plan, revise, criticise, gossip, learn, hate and love by narrative’ [[1]](#footnote-1)

In the opening stages of mediation much attention is given to each mediatee’s ‘story’/narrative summarising their view of the issue/conflict. The two stories are usually significantly different, yet presented with honesty, truthfulness and conviction. From this, the mediator provides a reflective, non-judgemental summary of each speaker’s narrative. Mediators are instructed to listen for salient aspects of each speech and to use any specific language and /or words that were used. If not looked for, nuances, double or hidden meanings, poor reality/perception and or comprehension can be missed. Moreover, finding an acceptable agenda list can be more difficult. Narrative theory can increase a mediator’s recognition-awareness and provide more meaningful agenda items.

Stress, trauma, emotions and life-issues can create a flawed or skewed narrative that can disrupt, divert or destroy a mediation. Williams suggests an appropriate narrative, in life-long practice and actions, provides a coherence, a unity for life.[[2]](#footnote-2)

‘To be ourselves we must have ourselves — possess, if need be re-possess, our   
 life-stories. We must “recollect” ourselves, recollect the inner drama, the narrative,   
 of ourselves. A man needs such a narrative, a continuous inner narrative, to  
 maintain his identity, his self.’ [[3]](#footnote-3)

Knowing what to do and how to do it in such cases, can create a more positive mediation and outcomes.  
**Background to narratives**

‘We have, each of us, a life-story, an inner narrative — whose continuity, whose sense, is our lives. It might be said that each of us constructs and lives, a “narrative,” and that this narrative is us, our identities.’[[4]](#footnote-4)

Narratives are socially-constructed, outside-in developments, from parents, social contacts, home, school, community and beyond. From birth onwards every human is establishing, adding, developing and refining a unique narrative. Speech was not required. ‘Preverbal and non-speaking children are able to share an experience, recount an event, and tell a story in collaboration with an intimate adult who provides   
the words’[[5]](#footnote-5)

Before speech came observation, social interaction, imitation, deliberation, calculation and construction of an identity, a self or self-hood. Through trial and error, a child’s movements, body language, expressions, sounds, utterances, and feedback develop into a communicative ‘language’ that identifies and asserts itself as a narrative identity. As a person learns and ages, their narrative changes with the social climate.

**The philosopher’s view of narrative**

The French philosopher, Paul Ricoeur, called this narrative identity ‘self’ or selfhood.[[6]](#footnote-6) He proposed that this uniqueness was internal and protected. Another self (‘Self as another’) was used to communicate and interact with the outside. There could be many variations of this self as another, depending on the interaction/communication/context (e.g. self as another student or sportsperson or speaker, or job applicant or representative or salesperson or manager, lover, partner mother, father etc). Each self as another had authority to act appropriately and had a responsibility to report back to the core ‘self’. Each self as another carried some of the content, knowledge, experience and hopes of the ‘self’ as a narrative but was flexible and capable of change. Should that happen, the core ‘self’ could add it to the inner narrative, creating coherence, or reject it, creating conflict, uncertainty and stress. Many mediatees act out the latter rejection role play.

It is interesting that Ricoeur’s concept was elucidated hundreds of years ago by William Shakespeare, in *As You Like It*, Act-II, Scene VII, Jacques’ soliloquy:

‘All the world’s a stage,  
And all the men and women merely players;  
They have their exits and their entrances,  
And one man in his time plays many parts’

**The sociologist’s view of narrative**

The socialisation of humankind allows interchange with others to allow changes in narratives via adding an embedded metaphor to another narrative and/or a narrative to another metaphor. The interchange occurs through language and the ‘utterance’[[7]](#footnote-7) of words the meaning of which can vary with both inflection and intonation and/or the context of the communication/interchange. A positive incorporation of another’s narrative/metaphor only occurs in a safe, congenial, co-operative context, called ‘speaking with’ or ‘talking with’. Negatives are likely to occur where the conversation involves one person ‘speaking to’ one or more others. This one-way flow can seem to generate external consensus but no or little positive addition to a person’s narrative and a rejection of the metaphor/concept/idea/change and the possibility of a stasis.

In a positive conversation, the metaphors are reuseable ; the narrative is open-ended and everlastingly available for revision/revising/editing. This becomes the culture that can proceed to processes that define the structure of that social interaction/organisation. This is precisely where a mediator can intervene positively . Mediation abounds with metaphors like*: ‘I’ve tried so hard’; ‘I’m determined to win this battle’; ‘It’s not the money, it’s the principle’; ‘You make lots of money, I’m only on a pension’.*

This development leads onto ‘positioning’ whereby an utterance in reply to another person’s speech (utterance) is met by an utterance that is two-fold: a response to the first speaker and a shifting stance or position within the conversation (dialogue).[[8]](#footnote-8) This often denotes an imbalance of power not immediately obvious. Michael White saw this as an example of ‘absence but implicit’[[9]](#footnote-9) — a hidden message like a metaphorical time bomb that, by threatening to explode, sabotages any attempt at resolution. White also made famous the quote   
‘The problem is not the person. The problem is the problem’

I find it easier to talk about the problem being underneath (or behind) the problem.

**The mediator’s view of narrative**  
Ruth Beach[[10]](#footnote-10) found that White’s hidden element was often a person’s stuck position based on one of Kubler-Ross’ five stages of grief: Rejection, anger, depression, bargaining and acceptance. Winslade and Monk poetically cover similar angles:

‘In the shadow of a story of angry exchanges there are moments of reflection, and remorse or quiet calmness.

In the shadows of a story of despair, there are moments of hope.

In the shadows of a story of obstinacy, there are moments of willingness to negotiate

In the shadows of a story of denigration there are instances of respect.

The skill of the mediator lies in catching these moments and inquiring into them.’,[[11]](#footnote-11)[[12]](#footnote-12)

**What to do**

‘Narrative approaches build on an outside-in approach that emphasises how people’s interests, emotions, behaviours and interpretations are produced within a cultural or discursive world of relations and then internalised.’[[13]](#footnote-13)

1. The mediator utilises ‘double listening’[[14]](#footnote-14)…listening to the spoken words and sentences and listening for the hidden message or emotional block that sabotages any attempt at resolution. When the latter are discovered/identified, questioning is directed to these elements/emotions/perceptions. This externalising of the ‘real’ conflict allows both parties to engage in a different dialogue that often leads to a collaboration and on to a quite different ending than expected.
2. Positioning: When discovered, particularly if there is a hidden power imbalance, a mediator could have break-out, one-on-one sessions with each mediatee. In such a way each person can, via subtle questioning of externalised conflicts, come to see that they are operating from a one-up or a one-down position and make internal re-adjustments.
3. Discourse: The mediator can adjust their language, words and metaphors to match the mediatees’ internalised problem, conflict, perceptions and/or expectations. Once externalised the discourse will take a different direction.
4. Alternative story: By defining the problem behind the problem, alternative narratives and courses of action are possible.
5. Longer pre-mediation meetings, more frequent breakout one-on-one sessions can help each mediatee stay on course to a different narrative.
6. Have a mental check-list of narrative inquiry questions as found in Cotter[[15]](#footnote-15), Winslade and Monk[[16]](#footnote-16) and in C. Adam Foster[[17]](#footnote-17)

**Conclusion**

Narrative mediation can be used in most mediations and disputes. By changing the emphasis from external conflict to underlying emotions, cultural expectations and societal perceptions, a new thinking and new discourse can be established. Solving this new problem can be a shared discourse that may improve the chances of a more amicable settlement.

1. Barbara Hardy,1968,p.5., quoted in Bernard Williams.2007. Life as Narrative. European Journal of Philosophy 17:2 ISSN 0966-8373 pp. 305–314 DOI: 10.1111/j.1468-0378.2007.00275.x [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Bernard Williams 2007 Life as Narrative. European Journal of Philosophy 17:2  
    ISSN 0966-8373 pp. 305–314 DOI: 10.1111/j.1468-0378.2007.00275.x. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Oliver Sachs. 1985 Sacks, Oliver (1985). The man who mistook his wife for a hat, and other clinical tales. New York: Summit. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Oliver Sachs Ibid 3 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Veronica Ellis. 2007. The Narrative Matrix and Wordless Narrations: A Research Note. Augmentative and Alternative Communication, June 2007 VOL. 23 (2), pp. 113 – 125 DOI: 10.1080/07434610600931858 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. 55 Henry Venema. Paul Ricoeur of Refigurative Reading and Narrative Identity  
   [Symposium](https://www.pdcnet.org/collection-anonymous/browse?fp=symposium)**.** Volume 4, Issue 2, Fall 2000. Pg. 237-248

   <https://doi.org/10.5840/symposium20004219> [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. An utterance is ‘the movement of bonding two or more positioning acts, so that the discursive field in which a given position have been taken becomes reorganised. It is a dynamic process.’  
   Andrés Haye and Antonia Larraín. 2011.WHAT IS AN UTTERANCE? Dialogicality in Focus ISBN 978-1-61122-817-5. Editors: M. Märtsin, B. Wagoner et al. pp. © 2011 Nova Science Publishers,Inc. Downloaded from : https://www.researchgate.net/publication/229433006\_What\_is\_an\_utterance/link/5c87ad5c92851c831974dc6d/download [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. See 7 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Alison Cotter 2012a. A Narrative Approach to Employment mediation. Explorations: An e-journal of narrative practice | www.dulwichcentre.com.au/e-journal.html | 2012 Issue 1, 1-3. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Ruth Beach, 2019, Resolution Institute PDG event | Mediation and the grieving process, Thursday 31 October 2019 | Adelaide. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Winslade, J. & Monk, G. (2008). Practicing narrative mediation: Loosening the grip of conflict. San Francisco, CA: Jossey Bass. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Debbie Dunn, Tasmanian mediator in Resolution Institute webinar - Narrative Mediation. What’s the story?, June 2020. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Cotter See9 [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Cotter Ibid [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Cotter See 9 [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Winslade and Monk See 11 [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. C Adam Foster Once upon a Mediation: The role of Narrative in ADR. Colorado Lawyer April 2019 [↑](#footnote-ref-17)