



The Relationship between Theory and Practice in the Conflict Resolution Field

A Public Lecture by Evan Hoffman, PhD

Executive Director, Canadian International Institute of Applied Negotiation

Delivered on 24 January, 2012

At Hatley Castle, Royal Roads University

Good morning, I'm very pleased to be here and thanks for allowing me an opportunity to speak today. I've been asked to discuss the relationship between theory and practice as it pertains to Conflict Resolution (CR) and just to get you thinking about this topic a little more, before I share my own thoughts on it, please turn to the person next you and say what you think the relationship between the two might be.

One way I like to think about this, is as two overlapping spheres.

THE SPHERE OF PRACTITIONERS

The first sphere is filled with practitioners. CR is unique because by its very nature conflict is something that each and every one of us experiences every single day. So, in a sense we are all CR practitioners.

So, unlike nursing or car repair skills, for example, we have opportunities to practice CR skills everyday in our personal and professional lives. For this reason it is especially important to model CR skills when teaching them and managing a classroom, and this is something that I consistently do.



As an extension of that, role-plays, simulations and practical exercises are tools I also use when teaching CR skills. In this manner, I place a large focus on experiential learning. That is, CR skills are in many ways best learned through doing. We can do this by practicing them in a safe environment and receiving constructive feedback.

Moreover, this also means that students generally have ample personal material of their own to draw from, and grounding new skills and knowledge in the students' own context is one of the keys of adult learning. In other words, you need to make it relevant and meaningful to them. For this reason when training others in CR skills I always like to draw examples from the collective experience of those in the room.

We also know that CR practitioners should be reflective practitioners. A reflective practitioner is one who conducts self-analysis - - one who utilizes their CR skills and then observes the impact to see if the intended result was reached or not. From this basis they can then make corrections. When I teach CR skills I always try to reinforce the idea that you must become a reflective practitioner. One of the tools for reinforcing and modeling this behavior is through the use of a learning journal or a learning log and I always encourage students to use this device for self-reflection.

However, in order to be effective, what CR practitioners do must have basis in theory - that is, *theory must inform practice* - and from this premise we now turn to the second sphere.

THE RESEARCH-THEORY SPHERE

CR is a unique field not only because it is a relatively new area of study but also because it is multi-disciplinary. In fact, at the last MA in Conflict Analysis and Management (MACAM) residency during the first week I provided a general overview of the field that presented a number of key ideas and then I asked groups of students to map out the CR field using some of the key ideas I presented – the range of topic areas and disciplines that they identified was amazing. It covered such diverse areas as political science, psychology, sociology, organizational



management, etc. So, I feel it is important to recognize this fact early on and maintain this focus when introducing people to the CR field.

One of the best examples of using an interdisciplinary focus in research stems from a previous MACAM Major Research Project (MRP) that applied hostage negotiation theory to classroom bullies. As I understand it, this research generated a lot of buzz and was very well-received.

The other reason, I believe, this MRP made such a large impact was because it offered practical and much-needed solutions to teachers about a real problem many of them struggle with every day in their classrooms.

This, of course, speaks to the need to undertake research that is useful for practitioners or others and this can be achieved in a number of ways. For example, three specific ways to make CR research useful for practitioners are as follows:

1. Focus on research questions from the real world that require solutions or new insights.
2. Package results in user-friendly manners.
3. Include a section with policy implications in theoretical articles.

In the case of the MRP on classroom bullies, parts of the research were re-packaged into a webinar.

Lastly, the findings of this MRP could be taken seriously because they were firmly rooted in a qualitative research design and to me this speaks to the need to maintain a focus on producing sound research. To this end, I place a great emphasis on research design and methodological issues when I do my own research or when I'm supervising student research.



COMPLETING THE LOOP

I said earlier that theory informs practice, but it is a cyclical relationship and practice informs theory via lessons learned studies and by providing case studies and examples for research. Scholars can then employ a large-n methodology, for example, that examines the features of many cases or they can do cross-case comparisons between a much smaller number of cases.

In this sense, I always try to maintain a focus on how the theoretical relates to the practical and vice-versa.

SCHOLAR-PRACTITIONERS

There is an area in the middle where the two spheres overlap and this is the realm of the scholar-practitioner.

There are a lot of very accomplished CR practitioners who teach CR skills, but perhaps with little or no focus on the theory because they are not academics. Likewise, there are many academics who can teach theories of CR but have little practical experience with seeing the theories applied in the real world.

Somewhere in the middle bridging these two spheres is the scholar-practitioner who can speak both to the academic literature and reinforce the theories in the literature with examples from their practice and I believe that Scholar-practitioners are particularly well-suited for teaching in some programs such as the MACAM program which places a focus on both the theoretical and practical aspects of CR.