4

Co-authoring New Relationships at School through Narrative Mediation

Michael Williams and John Winslade

Abstract

The practice of narrative mediation is illustrated through a case study for its applicability to the resolution of conflict in a high school. Two boys who had been fighting are brought together by a New Zealand high school counsellor to address their differences. Fighting is externalised and the boys are invited into a relationship story based on their own knowledge of ways to resist fighting. The mediation disrupts the conflict narrative and develops a counter-story of harmonious relationship. This article illustrates narrative mediation in action and provides a commentary to make it understandable and replicable for school counsellors. As a straightforward case study, the article does not make substantial claims for this practice but seeks to inspire further applications of narrative mediation by school counsellors.

Keywords: narrative, mediation, externalising, conflict resolution, school counselling

Fighting between students at high schools is traditionally dealt with by punishing the protagonists. Punishment, however, often gives no guarantee that the conflict has been resolved and often produces unwanted side effects (resentment towards authorities, alienation from schooling, threats of retribution, professional frustration, and so on). Mediation is an alternative action that can restore relationship and lead to a more lasting resolution of conflict without negative residual after-effects. It can be used either instead of punishment or after a punishment has been administered. In schools, the school counsellor is usually the professional most highly trained in the skills of conflict resolution. In this article we highlight an approach to mediation that can be used by school counsellors for this purpose. It is illustrated with a case study that records an actual mediation process and demonstrates the approach at work.

Narrative mediation

The approach to mediation that is highlighted in this article is an application of the principles of narrative mediation (Winslade & Monk, 2000, 2008; Winslade, Monk, & Cotter, 1998). It is built on a process of re-authoring a relationship that has been caught up in a conflict-saturated story (Winslade & Monk, 2000) leading to a physical fight. Rather than resolving problem issues through an exploration of underlying interests (Fisher, Ury, & Patton, 1991; Moore, 1996) in order to arrive at a relationship shift, the narrative approach to mediation starts from a different angle. It aims to shift the relationship story onto a new footing so that the remaining issues between the disputants can be addressed from within a different narrative—ideally, one that is more satisfying and invigorating for those involved than the conflict narrative has been.

Narrative mediation proceeds from the premise that persons are multi-storied rather than single-storied (White, 2007; Winslade & Monk, 2008). The same can be said for relationships. Any particular story of a relationship is only one of a selection of possible stories that can be told about what has transpired between the parties. The story that makes a fight seem inevitable, justifiable, or at least understandable can best be understood as a narrative that has come to dominate those involved, rather than as essential to who they are or to the nature of their relationship. If we are prepared to search for it, there usually exist, in the shadows of a conflict story, other stories of relationship that are being subordinated (White, 2007) by the dominance of the conflict story in the consciousness of the disputants. The aim of a narrative mediation process is to rescue such subordinate stories from the oblivion to which they appear to be consigned and to recuperate them in the lives of those who have been in conflict.

There also exists a school counselling literature on the use of narrative approaches more generally. A general narrative approach to counselling in schools is documented by Winslade and Monk (2007). Others have shown how narrative counselling approaches are especially effective with children and youth (Freeman, Epston, & Lobovits, 1997; McMenamin, 2004; Smith & Nylund, 1997), at risk youth (Ungar, 2006), and with students diagnosed with ADHD (Nylund, 2000). Narrative principles have also been employed to address a variety of problems generated by relational conflict, such as teasing among primary school children (Morgan, 1996), bullying among primary and secondary school students (Beaudoin & Taylor, 2004; Williams & Winslade, 2008), restorative practices in response to disciplinary issues (Restorative Practices Development Team, 2004), and in an anti-harassment programme in a high school (Cheshire, Lewis, & the Antiharassment Team, 2004). All

of this literature emphasises the transformation of problems through the restorying of problematic stories.

A fight in a school

The story that we feature in this article happened in a New Zealand high school. It quickly escalated into a fight between two boys. These two found themselves positioned in a narrative that trapped them into physical violence and restricted their choices for other positive actions. After a referral to the school counsellor, the two boys took part in a mediation conversation in which they succeeded in co-authoring a different story of their relationship: one that opened up the possibility of a much greater harmony and thus restricted further opportunities for retaliation and retribution. Through this process, two students redefined aspects of their identities to make it more likely that they might realise their hopes for success at school.

The first author was the school counsellor who mediated the conversation. The story is written from the perspective of the mediator. The names of the boys concerned have been changed to protect their anonymity. Both gave permission for this story to be published. We will interrupt the telling of the story (which is told in the first person) at strategic points with commentary that links the practice to the theory (which is spoken about in the third person).

* * *

The mediation

I deliberately left my office door open so that when the boys arrived, I could greet them. When they did arrive, I raised my eyebrows quickly in the Polynesian manner of greeting and motioned for them to sit down.

"Hi boys," I said, and smiled. "You're not in trouble but there is something we need to get sorted. I guess you were expecting this meeting?"

"Yeah, the Deputy Principal told us you wanted to talk to us," the tallest boy retorted.

Both boys held their heads high in defiance. I smiled to myself as I thought how important it was for these two to protect their mana.

They sat on opposite sides of the room not looking at each other. There was tension and strain between the two boys.

"You're right about meeting to talk, but actually it wasn't my idea for *me* to talk to you. I would rather *you* talked to me," I countered with a smile. "I heard you nearly had a fight."

"Yeah," said the other boy; "I could have smashed him but I didn't."

I could tell by this provocative statement that the boys were in no mood to discuss anything, but I persevered.

"What I would like to hear is how it came to this. I have studied fights over the years in my job and I would love to hear about this one," I said. "My guess is that both of you are a bit surprised to be here in this room and that this fight just crept up on you and you weren't expecting it. Is that right?" They both nodded imperceptibly.

* * *

Externalising conversation

Here the mediator seeks to position the parties in a grammatical shift through utilising the narrative technique of externalising. Developed first by Michael White and David Epston (1990) as an aspect of narrative family therapy, and later brought into narrative mediation (Winslade & Monk, 2000), externalising involves speaking about the conflict as if it is separate from the persons who are embroiled in it. The conflict itself is objectified and spoken of as if it has designs on the two parties, rather than as something that originated in either of them. In this instance, the mediator refers to the fight as something "that crept up on you." It is deliberately non-blaming language and allows some saving of face rather than encouraging the pinning of blame on each other. The mediator supports the two boys from a decentred position (White, 2005). He makes it clear that he is rejecting collaboration with either party (or with the school authorities) and is seeking to privilege their telling of the story and its uniqueness. He invites the boys into an inquiry about fighting when he says, "I have studied fights over the years in my job and I would love to hear about this one," and in doing so, helps them to unravel the tactics of power that the conflict has used to recruit the boys into fighting (White, 2007). Together they seek to gain a greater understanding of the "size" of the presenting problem.

* * *

"When we have meetings like this," I continued, "I usually get people to talk one at a time and they tell me the story of what happened. Then we see if we can come up with a solution to the problem and try to work out how to move forward. How does that sound?"

Silence.

"You're Jackson, and you're Jerome, is that right?"

"Yes," they both said.

"Has there been some 'beef' between you two for a while?" I inquired.

"I hardly know him," Jackson said. "I didn't go to his intermediate school."

I looked at the two boys closely.

"Who would like to start first?" I asked.

"Well, I came round the corner of B Block on Monday with my mates, and he *looked* at me," Jerome said.

I was intrigued. A look, I thought; it must have been more than that! But I kept my thoughts to myself.

"Then what happened?" I asked.

"I just kept on walking and I wondered if he wanted to fight. My mates said he looked like he wanted a fight and they asked me if I was going to smash him," Jerome said.

"What did you think about them saying that?" I asked.

"Well, I wasn't sure if he wanted to fight, but they said he did," Jerome replied.

"Then what?"

"I went up to him and collared him and asked him if he wanted a fight," Jerome explained.

"What did he say?" I asked.

"He said he didn't want to fight, but I was sure he was lying."

"Were you?" I looked over at Jackson.

"Nah," said Jackson. "I'm not allowed to fight; I'm a boxer."

"How come you are not allowed to fight?" I asked.

"Well, if I fight at school, I get stood down from my club," he said. "I have had 21 fights; 19 were K.O.s and two were decisions," he said proudly.

"What do those numbers mean?"

"It means that I have had 21 fights for my club and I have won them all!"

I watched Jerome as he heard this. I noticed a small movement of surprise on his face.

"I'm sorry," I said, "I have jumped ahead here. I haven't given you a chance to tell your story," I said to Jackson.

"It's simple," Jackson said. "I was just sitting on the bench and these boys came round the corner and the sun was behind them. I thought I recognised Jerome from my last school but he was hard to see with the sun behind him and I kind of screwed my eyes up," he explained. "Yeah I looked at him, but not like he said."

"Then what happened?" I asked curiously.

"He came up to me with his boys and I stood up to meet him and he collared me. That's when the teacher came and broke it up. I didn't want to fight him. I'm not allowed to fight."

* * *

Double listening

The mediator here has listened to the story from both parties. Like many conflict stories, it features a narrow range of positions (Winslade, 2005; Winslade & Monk, 2008) which each person feels constrained by and into which each person calls the other. The mediator has, however, been double listening (Winslade & Monk, 2008) while the two stories are being told. Double listening involves hearing the conflict story but at the same time keeping an ear out for openings to an alternative story, especially one that might work against violence. Jackson's last remark presents itself as an opening to such an alternative story. The mediator decides to explore it further. Rather than exploring the motives for the fighting (which would risk making the fighting seem more justified and inevitable), he deliberately shifts to asking about the narrative elements that work in the opposite direction. To do so requires a commitment to curiosity about the knowledge that is held by the parties themselves of what might make a difference, rather than speaking with the voice of authoritative professional knowledge and trying to convince the boys of the correctness of this voice.

* * *

"What held you back from fighting him, apart from what your club said?"

"My parents would be angry if I fight. I want to stay at school. And there's my girlfriend. She told me that if I fight at school, she's gonna dump me."

I wondered about what these expectations meant for Jackson. "What *are* the rules about fighting, Jackson?"

"Well," he began, "there are club rules…and…you get kicked out if you fight anywhere the club has not approved."

"Any other rules about fighting?" I asked with a note of curiosity in my voice. "School rules, maybe?"

"Well I don't really care about school rules," he said with pride, "but yeah, you're not allowed to fight at school."

"I even heard you say there were some family rules," I suggested. His head lowered. "Yeah," he said with barely a move.

"Could there be any rules that adults and teachers don't know about?" I inquired

nonchalantly. "Maybe 'kids' rules…? One kid told me the other day that if someone asks you for a fight, you have to give it. Is that a kind of 'kid rule'?"

"Well it's not really a *rule*," Jackson retorted. "It's just something you have to do, but I don't buy it!"

* * *

Identifying counter-stories

Jackson here has been able to articulate a considerable range of knowledge of the reasons for non-violence. Such knowledge does not fit with his participation in the fight that transpired but a narrative mediator is less interested in narrative congruence than in opening up contrast between the conflict story and a basis for alternative story. The latter was largely excluded from the initial stories told by each boy, but it has now been made possible to talk about. This has not happened by accident but by a particular form of listening and inquiring.

"What do you want to do when you leave school?" I changed tack.

"I want to be an architect," Jackson said with a hint of pride.

"You'll have to stay away from fighting then," I joked.

I turned again to Jerome. "Now that you've heard what Jackson has said, does that change anything?" I asked.

"Yeah, I found out that he doesn't want to fight me, so it would be a boring fight because he wouldn't fight back," he said.

"Are the rules the same for Jackson as for you?" I asked. "What would your parents and your family say if they knew about this fighting?"

"I would be in trouble if they knew, but I just got angry and my mates were saying he looked at me."

* * *

The counter-story has been grown further by an inquiry into Jerome's knowledge of reasons to avoid fighting. Rather than emphasising rules from the point of view of authority, the mediator seeks out more pragmatically effective rules: those that are subscribed to by the parties themselves. Jerome, too, was able to reference family values that run counter to the violent expression of conflict. He was also able to offer a construction of fighting as having no point in the event that the fight would be a "boring fight."

* * *

I wondered how much both boys knew about the effects of anger. "How do guys like you manage their anger?" I asked.

"I joined boxing," Jackson offered, "and that really helped. I work out, and I don't let myself get angry. I need to think straight."

"If a boy is able to manage anger well, how do you think it would help?" I wondered aloud. This hypothetical third-person question inquires further into the boys' counter-knowledge to the knowledge of the problem.

"It would mean that I have a future. I want to be an architect," he reminded me.

"What do you want to do when you leave school, Jerome?" I asked.

"Accountant," he said sheepishly.

"What would happen to your future if you got sidetracked by fighting?"

He looked at the floor and said sadly, "It wouldn't happen."

The room went silent and both boys seemed to be thinking very deeply about what we were discussing. I looked up as if I had an idea, and I stretched my hands out in the air and described plaques on a building. "I can just see it now," I said excitedly. "Jerome, Accountant, and Jackson, Architect!" They both smiled and I wondered whether we were making progress.

* * *

The mediator here continues to practise externalising by first talking about anger and then about fighting as external forces that threaten both boys' dreams of a bright future. In the last question, he is doing a little of what is known in narrative mediation as "mapping the effects of the problem story" (Winslade & Monk, 2000, 2008). In this case, the effects do not just exist in the present but in an imagined future. An assumption of narrative mediation is that it is more productive to explore such effects than to inquire into the causes of a conflict. Studying the causes of a conflict entrenches it further as inevitable, whereas studying its effects opens up more places where changes can be made. As this conversation develops, the two boys are steadily stepping out of the relational place that the conflict story had prescribed for them. They are now starting to speak from within a different narrative.

* * *

"Can you see how pressure from others can make us do things we might not want to do?" I asked, using externalising language again to refer to pressure and separating it from what the two boys might "want to do."

"I wonder if Jackson's boxing reputation was known to a few kids and they wanted

you to test him," I said, looking inquisitively at Jerome. "I suppose you were going through a bit of a test yourself, Jerome? I wonder what you can tell your mates now about Jackson."

"I am going to tell them that he's all right and that we have sorted it out with your help," he replied.

"You two are doing the sorting out," I smiled. I didn't mind, however, if he used me to save face with his friends.

"Let's see if we can capture all these ideas we have discovered," I said. "Let's make a chart so we can see what we have learned." I wrote down their ideas on my whiteboard, headed up with:

BRILLIANT EXCUSES TO RESIST FIGHTING

- School/club/family rules.
- Future in danger of being wrecked.
- Girlfriend/brothers/dad don't want me to fight.
- Wouldn't be a proper fight.

"That's a good start," I said. "Can we turn that into an agreement?" I asked.

They nodded cautiously. Under the bullet points I wrote:

CONTRACT BETWEEN JEROME AND JACKSON, MARCH 11, 2009

* * *

Being recorded here on the whiteboard were the meanings that could be drawn from the narrative elements that ran counter to the story of fighting. Each of the boys has contributed to this list, and it refers to concepts and experiences that have currency in their own cultural world. It is not a list that is imposed on them from the school's perspective or from any professional expertise. It therefore stands a better chance of taking effect. It is an important principle of narrative practice that documenting such counter-knowledges helps to strengthen them (White & Epston, 1990; Winslade & Monk, 2000). The practice of taking spoken words and rendering them in written form grants the words greater authority and status and allows them to reverberate longer in the parties' consciousness. Using the parlance of the protagonists honours the uniqueness of this particular conflict and its corresponding resolution. The two boys and the mediator are about to construct an entirely new relationship, with a storyline that has never existed before. In addition, the publication of the contract formalises

and solidifies the repudiation of their reputations as "troublemakers" or "fighters" (Epston, 2008).

Negotiating agreement

Now it was time to negotiate an agreement about how to go forward from this point. In narrative mediation, it is important for this negotiation to be built upon the foundation of a counter-story of relationship that has already been established rather than to do so immediately after the telling of the conflict story. Here, the mediator judged that the talk about the reasons to resist fighting that had taken place was strong enough to build some concrete actions upon.

* * *

"What have we decided to do about our 'beef' after this meeting?" I inquired. "Would you like to write one part of the deal each?"

Jackson came first to the whiteboard and wrote, "We've sorted it out."

Jerome came up and added, "It's all good now."

Then, without prompting, they signed their names, and before I had a chance to say anything Jackson turned to Jerome and said, "I'm sorry I looked at you."

I looked startled as I wasn't expecting this, because Jackson wasn't the aggressor. Jerome responded by saying, "I am sorry too; I shouldn't let other people peer-pressure me."

They embraced and patted each other on the back, then sat down smiling. I wanted to join in the hugs as well! I thanked them for their willingness to meet together and I sent them back to class.

I heard from the Deputy Principal the next day that both boys had gone over to his office before returning to class and told him excitedly that "it was sorted." Both boys apologised to him and said they were sorry for giving him grief!

* * *

Discussion

The denouement of this particular drama was actually very quick and easy. The boys had embraced an alternative story of relationship that featured "reasons to resist fighting," and had used it to take actions toward each other that would not have been predicted at the start of the conversation when they were both still in the thrall of the conflict. The apologies had been volunteered and the hugs appeared spontaneous. The idea of going to speak to the Deputy Principal and to restore a better relationship with him and with

the school had also come from the boys themselves. Each of these actions was a plot development in the counter-narrative. The decision by the boys to tell the Deputy Principal that the conflict had been resolved further enhanced the possibility that reputations of fighting might not be permanently assigned (Epston, 2008). Such counter-stories constitute new stories of self-definition and, while they require the whole school community for their construction and maintenance (Lindemann Nelson, 2001), they serve as a "durable statement of what they are/can be" (Epston, 2008, p. 141).

Once such a narrative has taken root, it can continue to send out new shoots and, like a rhizome (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987), extend its coverage by sending down further roots in new territory. It would have to take root in the relationships with those who were bystanders to the original fight, for example. And both boys might need to speak to the story that "it's sorted" with their families, girlfriends, boxing club trainers, and so on. The conflict that sparked this story has created new relational spaces for both the boys and their friends. In this case these new spaces were not explicitly negotiated in detail, but the story of resolution and reconciliation was still likely to spread beyond the walls of the counselling room. Friends of the two protagonists would not be expecting such a dramatic outcome, and when they saw that the boys had resolved the conflict peacefully, they would be interested to know how it was achieved. Conflict stories do not exist only in the experience worlds of the major protagonists but are woven into the webs of relationship and discourse communities of which they are a part. So too must an alternative story (or a counter-story) be woven into these same relationship webs and discourse communities.

Subverting the expected plot trajectory in this way provides the young people with access to membership in new groups. In Jackson's case, by resisting the call to fight, he solidified his position in the school as someone who has physical power but chooses not to exert it. Jerome, on the other hand, regrades himself as someone who has escaped the jaws of punishment by taking a mature approach and resisting the temptation to fight. As the wider school community recognises the growth of new practical identities, it co-authors the description of these boys as morally competent young men. The more these boys act as they are expected to, the more they fulfil that plot.

One year later, the two boys were interviewed again. They were asked what they remembered about the way the mediation was used to sort out the problem, and about what had happened since the mediation conversation. Here are some of their comments:

It was good; it helped us sort things out quickly and we have been good friends since then.

I learned that there's not much point in fighting and now I focus on doing my best. I could have been a hater but I thought about what happened and I decided I wanted to go through school.

I have not been in any kind of trouble since then and I am doing well at school.

A check of the school records revealed that neither boy had been in any disciplinary trouble for the year following the mediation, for fighting or for anything else.

What we have presented here is one case example. It is not given as a model to be slavishly followed but as an example of the kind of approach that might be derived from a narrative practice of mediation in the context of a fight in a school. It might be said that there are far more intractable conflicts that school counsellors are called on to address on a regular basis, and we would agree. But there is not yet a substantial literature on narrative mediation, and what exists has not been heavily documented in the work of school counsellors. Our aim here has been to introduce this practice and to show a glimpse of how it might be deployed, through this relatively straightforward illustration. It can be read as an inspirational example rather than as a definitive description of a practice. There is plenty of room for this work to be taken up by others and to be systematically studied. To our knowledge, no one has yet done this. This article is an attempt, therefore, to articulate an introduction to the practice. Along the way, we hope we have offered some alternatives to mainstream mediation practice and alluded to how these distinctions can be utilised.

References

Beaudoin, M.-N., & Taylor, M. (2004). *Breaking the culture of bullying and disrespect, Grades K–8: Best practices and successful strategies.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

Cheshire, A., Lewis, D., & the Antiharassment Team. (2004). Young people and adults in a team against harassment: Bringing forth student knowledge and skill. In D. Paré & G. Larner (Eds.), *Collaborative practice in psychology and therapy* (pp. 121–132). New York: Haworth.

Deleuze, G., & Guattari, F. (1987). *A thousand plateaus: Capitalism and schizophrenia* (Trans. B. Massumi). Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

Epston, David. (2008). *Down under and up over.* Warrington, UK: AFT Publishing.

Fisher, R., Ury, W., & Patton, B. (1991). *Getting to yes: Negotiating agreement without giving in* (2nd ed.). London: Penguin.

Freeman, J., Epston, D., & Lobovits, D. (1997). *Playful approaches to serious problems: Narrative therapy with children and their families.* New York: Norton.

Lindemann Nelson, H. (2001). *Damaged identities, narrative repair.* Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

McMenamin, D. (2004). Talking about "knowing with" (Like a team!). In D. Paré & G. Larner (Eds.), *Collaborative practice in psychology and therapy* (pp. 97–108). New York: Haworth.

Moore, C. (1996). *The mediation process: Practical strategies for resolving conflict.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Morgan, A. (1996). Taking responsibility: Working with teasing and bullying in schools. In A. Morgan (Ed.), *Once upon a time: Narrative therapy with children and their families* (pp. 209–230). Adelaide: Dulwich Centre Publications.

Nylund, D. (2000). *Treating Huckleberry Finn: A new narrative approach to working with kids diagnosed ADD/ADHD.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Restorative Practices Development Team. (2004). *Restorative practices in schools: A resource.* Hamilton, NZ: School of Education, University of Waikato.

Smith, C., & Nylund, D. (1997). *Narrative therapies with children and adolescents.* New York: Guilford.

Ungar, M. (2006). *Strengths-based counselling with at-risk youth.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

White, M. (2005). *Michael White workshop notes.* Retrieved April 1, 2009, from http://www.dulwichcentre.com.au

White, M. (2007). *Maps of narrative practice.* New York: Norton.

White, M., & Epston, D. (1990). *Narrative means to therapeutic ends.* New York: Norton.

Williams, M., & Winslade, J. (2008). Using undercover teams to restory bullying relationships. *Journal of Systemic Therapy, 27*(2), 1–16.

Winslade, J. (2005). Utilising discursive positioning in counselling. *British Journal for Guidance and Counselling, 33*(3), 351–364.

Winslade, J., & Monk, G. (2000). *Narrative mediation: A new approach to dispute resolution.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Winslade, J., & Monk, G. (2007). *Narrative counselling in schools: Powerful & brief.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

Winslade, J., & Monk, G. (2008). *Practicing narrative mediation: Loosening the grip of conflict.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Winslade, J., Monk, G., & Cotter, A. (1998). A narrative approach to the practice of mediation. *Negotiation Journal, 14*(1), 21–42.