



Laying the Groundwork for Mediation Skill-Building

International mediation is both a vast and narrow field, with both a global “workplace” and a narrow entry point. This Practitioner Piece seeks to point out pathways to early skill-building in mediation that may be transferrable to a career in international mediation and seeks to provide general resources for young professionals looking to further their work in mediation.

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About Ottawa Dialogue

Established in 2009, Ottawa Dialogue is a university-based organization that brings together research and action in the field of dialogue and mediation. Guided by the needs of the parties in conflict, Ottawa Dialogue develops and carries out quiet and long-term, dialogue-driven initiatives around the world. We create forums where parties can explore difficult issues in an analytical, problem-solving way to develop new paths forward. We then work with our partners to transfer these ideas to places where they can make a difference. As a complement to its field work, Ottawa Dialogue pursues a rich research agenda focused on conflict analysis, third party dialogue-based interventions, and best practices relating to “Track Two Diplomacy”.

Laying the Groundwork for Mediation Skill-Building

International mediation is both a vast and narrow field, with both a global “workplace” and a narrow entry point. In the [Ottawa Dialogue’s expert interview](#) with Dr. Tetiana Kyselova, Ukrainian dialogue convener and mediation scholar, she noted the lack of professionalization and/or standard accreditation within the international mediation field, creating a degree of confusion and sometimes disorganization among practitioners and between funders and fundees. Similarly, the context-specific knowledge that is required for one to be ethically involved in a particular dialogue (particularly as a facilitator) is deep, and the learning process must be ongoing. These realities may create a daunting picture for young professionals seeking to work in the international conflict resolution space, as a Track Two facilitator or otherwise. This Practitioner Piece seeks to point out pathways to early skill-building in mediation that may be transferrable to a career in international mediation and seeks to provide general resources for young professionals looking to further their work in mediation.

Community-level political work

Particularly at the student-level, community-based political work is often an accessible and meaningful pathway to building mediation skills. “Community-based political work” refers to working on hot-button political issues at the community (or perhaps student community) level. This may mean working for local NGOs in a support capacity with members of one’s community or participating in student groups that are required to work with an opposing institution (ex. the university itself) in an effort to pass certain policies or begin further conversations.

It is worth noting, however, international mediation does not necessarily equal activism. Inversely, mediation requires holding space for (often dramatically) divergent viewpoints and often withholding your own viewpoint from the dialogue. That being said, this ability to engage with divergent viewpoints is often required for changemaking community-level work and can be a major transferrable skill to the mediation world.

It may be worth further noting that explicit community-based mediation work is indeed included within the multitrack diplomacy pyramid, coined the “Track Three” level. Moreover, Dr. Julia Palmiano Federer notes in the Ottawa Dialogue’s [February 2021 Policy Brief](#) that the line between the Track Two and Track Three level has become slightly blurred as community-based actors become increasingly involved at the Track Two level, in an effort to align with the norm of inclusive peace and transfer these community-based perspectives to the higher tracks.

Non-mediation employment

Many, if not most, Track Two practitioners have held positions in non-mediation fields, where the skills learned have lent themselves to their ultimate work in international conflict resolution. Moreover, many non-mediation backgrounds can often serve as a way to bridge Track Two with other fields, creating innovative applications for this work. For example, Ottawa Dialogue’s Research Fellow, Dr. Aleem Bharwani, has (and continues to) work as a physician in Calgary, Alberta, and has worked to blend his expertise in community health with Track Two diplomacy. Some of this work was articulated by Dr. Bharwani, Dr. Pam Roach, Dr. Julia Palmiano Federer, and Dr. Peter Jones in a [recent blog post](#) for the PLOS *Speaking of Medicine* Blog.

Non-relevant non-mediation work may also be a great environment to build mediation skills. Customer service roles, front-of-house restaurant work, and other frontline support roles that are often (but not always) go-to part-time work for students and young people are often hotbeds for interpersonal clashes and often require (and teach) conflict resolution skills.

Interpersonal conflict and family mediation

Family mediation, though different from international mediation, teaches and requires skills that are often highly transferrable and overlapping with international mediation skills. Many of the existing training programmes for those interested in international mediation are based on training materials from the family mediation field, or group both international mediation and family mediation teaching materials together. Similarly, much of the early literature and key terms in the Track Two field (ex. “problem-solving workshop,” bargaining, etc.), are rooted in general mediation literature used in family mediation. Our earlier noted interviewee, Dr. Tetiana Kyselova, also noted her beginnings as a family mediator, and her transition to international mediation being sparked by the 2014 Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Additional Resources and Considerations

Moreover, while the international mediation field remains largely non-professionalized with significant literature gaps (perhaps due to the discreet nature of the work, though there is a significant body of literature on [Youth, Peace, and Security](#)) there is a growing interest in supporting future mediators and mediation projects in a more standardized and ethical way. Seeking mentorship from existing [experts in the region](#) and skilled practitioners can help to avoid “reinventing the wheel,” in the sense that one should avoid repeating work that may have already been done, and instead look to build on this work. Literature such as [Letters to a Young Mediator](#), online facilitation trainings (that may not be tailored for international mediation but seek to teach related skills nonetheless), [and reflection documents](#) on existing multitrack work may all serve as resources for young mediators interested in a career in the international mediation field.

Lastly, it may be worth noting that the divide between international mediation and non-international mediation is often influenced by a historically Eurocentric view of conflict and peace. Indeed, Eurocentrism can lend itself to a misguided view of non-Western conflict having the most pressing need for international mediators, and Western conflict (at all Tracks) being more of a question of political sociology than “real” conflict (and therefore outside of the realm of peacebuilding). Indeed, the term “international” can often be misconstrued as “non-West.” Avoiding this understanding of the international mediation field is crucial to building an ethical career and to innovate within the field.