

Emotional Literacy for the iPod® Generation

How Mobile Music Could Help in the Resolution of Conflict

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Abstract

Conflict resolution scholars are increasingly revising an earlier skepticism about the place of emotions in mediation. This view portrayed the mediator's role as focusing on the rational and verbal. A more holistic approach recognizes the significance of emotions in forming judgments and their positive contribution to the resolution of conflict. This article considers the potential of mobile music in accessing the emotional realm. Millions of consumers of music can no longer be regarded as passive recipients, as mobile music devices enable them to take control of their listening and create the soundtrack to all aspects of their lives. The article suggests possible ways to harness this phenomenon to develop emotional literacy, critical to conflict resolution and described by Goleman as "the master aptitude."¹

Keywords: Music, Conflict, Emotions, Conflict Resolution, Mobile Music

Introduction

I am writing this while listening to my past. Via the magic of ‘shuffle’ my iPod® presents three and four minute slices of music that wordlessly evoke memories: places, moments, smells, feelings, people, “where were you when you heard....?” Some barely touch me while others arouse intense emotions and even physical sensations, like that warm tingle of the spine when a piece of music scores a direct hit to my neural circuitry. All of this from a wee piece of technology barely ten years old.

We know that our emotions are intensely engaged by conflict. As a mediator I see this on a daily basis. For most of us these emotions are largely negative. In workshops I often ask people to tell each other about a real-life conflict, and then describe the emotions they experienced. The list is almost always the same: anger, sadness, fear, confusion, anxiety, betrayal, foolishness, a sense of injustice and (the ‘F-word’ of conflict) frustration. Given time positive words appear too: relief, energizing, galvanizing, revenge and even happiness. We should not think, however, that these feelings are somehow “irrational.” Antonio Damasio² summarizes research telling us that emotion and cognition are intimately connected: we have feelings about thoughts and thoughts about feelings. When we are in conflict we are likely to rely on “somatic markers” (cognitive shortcuts encapsulated in body and brain that save immense amounts of processing power) to help us make sense of what is happening and decide what action to take: “emotions and feelings have been connected, by learning, to predicted future outcomes of certain scenarios.”³ So emotions matter, and are in fact critical in helping us to deal effectively with novel and difficult situations such as interpersonal conflict.

And yet emotions remain troubling territory for conflict resolution. Excluded completely from formal institutions like the courts, even in the less formal setting of mediation emotions are portrayed as unhelpful and potentially obstructive, requiring to be “managed” by the mediator. One leading mediation commentator states: “folk wisdom suggests that a negotiator (1) should avoid getting emotional and (2) is a passive recipient of the whims of emotion.”⁴ Another puts it: “Negotiators – especially those trained in law – commonly address this problem by trying to exclude emotions from negotiation and to focus solely on so-called objective, rational factors, such as money.”⁵ There is a growing body of scholarship, however, proposing a more holistic approach.⁶ In this view, mediators work with emotions,

2 Antonio Damasio, *Descartes’ Error: Emotion, Reason and the Human Brain*. (London: Vintage Books, 1994)

3 Ibid, 1994, 174

4 Bernard Mayer, *The Dynamics of Conflict Resolution: A Practitioner’s Guide* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000), p. 43

‘Emotional Versus Rational’; see also Daniel Shapiro, “Negotiating Emotions” *Conflict Resolution Quarterly*, vol. 20, no.1, Fall 2002 67-82, at p.67; T Zane Reeves, “Practicing with the Heart as Metaphor” *ACResolution*, Spring 2010

5 Leonard Riskin, “Further Beyond Reason: Emotions, the Core Concerns and Mindfulness in Negotiation.” *Nevada Law Journal*, vol. 10, no.2, Spring 2010, 290-337, 294

6 For a summary of recent scholarship see Charlie Irvine, “Working With Emotions: A Grid for Practitioners” in Michelle LeBaron and Carrie MacLeod (Eds.), *Dancing at the Crossroads: Exploring Conflict Through Movement* (New York: American Bar Association, forthcoming); and Trisha S Jones, “Emotion in Mediation: Implications, Applications, Opportunities, and Challenges” in Margaret S Herman (Ed.), *The Blackwell Handbook of Mediation: Bridging Theory, Research, and Practice* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006).

both negative and positive, in helping people work out solutions to conflict that are sufficiently deep-rooted to endure. They ignore emotions at their peril.⁷ Approaches that enhance people's capacity to articulate their feelings and develop their emotional literacy⁸ are likely to be particularly useful.

How Might Mobile Music Contribute?

It is in the realm of the emotions that music plays its special role. It is clear that people who play music together are affected by it. Communal singing, composition, dancing; all achieve perhaps even more. But what of the millions of people who simply listen to music, sometimes unkindly characterized as mere consumers? For many of us, especially the young, the MP3 player provides life's soundtrack.⁹ Might it be possible to exploit this instant touching place for the emotions to affect how people make sense of and act in conflict? Could we use the portable music collection to steer into the heart of our feelings (and not sweep them under the carpet as some approaches to conflict resolution suggest)? Recent research provides support for this idea by demonstrating that the act of attending to one's emotions reduces arousal in the amygdala (the part of the brain recognized as the seat of the emotions).¹⁰ It has already been speculated by a number of writers that mediators should make more of people's capacity for emotional self-regulation.¹¹ I propose that the MP3 player has great potential to assist us with this task.

An important feature of iPods® and their ilk is the playlist. The playlist provides the architecture for the soundscapes we create. Playlists are personal - a unique matching up of one piece of music and another - and creative. People invest hours in crafting the right playlist for the right situation, like being their own club DJ. A playlist can contain two songs or two hundred and then shuffle within itself so that, having made the choices, the listener can still be surprised by the order.¹²

Conflict resolvers should be able to work with the self-expression unleashed by these playlists. The first and simplest idea would be to invite someone in conflict

7 Mayer suggests that, to be effectively handled, conflict resolution needs to occur on behavioral, cognitive and emotional dimensions: Mayer, 2000, pp.100-102

8 Daniel Goleman talks of "Emotional Intelligence", although this approach has been questioned

9 Teenagers in Britain spend an average of £1,000 per annum on mobile music and associated downloads, Osborne, H., (2009) Parental guidance: running cost of a teenager is now £9,000 a year. The Guardian, cited in Arild Bergh, Tia DeNora and Maia Bergh, (2010) "For Ever and Ever: Mobile Music in the Life of Young Teens" in J. Stanyek & S. Gophinath, (Eds.) The Oxford Handbook of Mobile (forthcoming).

10 Uwe Herwig, Tina Kaffenberger, Lutz Jancke & Annette B Bruhl, 'Self-related awareness and emotion regulation.' *Neuroimage* 50 (2010) 734-741

11 Jones, 2006; Roger Fisher & Daniel Shapiro, *Beyond Reason: Using Emotions As You Negotiate*. (New York: Viking Press, 2006); Evelin Lindner "Emotion and Conflict: Why It Is Important to Understand How Emotions Affect Conflict and How Conflict Affects Emotions." in Morton Deutsch, Peter T Coleman and Eric C Marcus (Eds.), *The Handbook of Conflict Resolution: Theory and Practice*. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2006)

12 See Bergh, DeNora and Bergh, 2010 who describe the variety of ways young teenagers make use of MP3 technology to accompany aspects of their lives

to “make a playlist for this situation.” This leaves it open to the person to express themselves in whatever way they choose. Another approach would be “make a playlist for how you feel about this situation.” This more clearly directs attention to the emotional realm, but risks narrowing the focus.

Going further, I was inspired by a visual art technique I learned from a children’s worker in my local family mediation service¹³ when I saw a striking set of images drawn by a child. She explained that she would ask the young person to divide a page into four and then draw in each quarter as follows:

- Past (how things used to be)
- Present (how things are)
- Future bad (my fears about what might happen)
- Future good (my hopes about what will happen)

Moving from visual to aural, a person experiencing conflict could be invited to create a playlist for each of these headings. This would provide insight into their emotional state as well as a self-soothing soundtrack to further emotion work. For those who have less time or patience, a simpler approach would be to focus on the latter two, hopes and fears.

To share or not to share

The creation and use of these playlists would be an end in itself, allowing a person to attend to the emotions conjured up by conflict in a safe, private setting. A practical spin-off, adapted from Cognitive Behavioral Therapy,¹⁴ could be to help a person detect change over time: a playlist created earlier may seem out of date and no longer capture their mood, providing them with evidence that they have moved on.

These techniques would be particularly helpful in the “pre-mediation” stage of conflict resolution. This step typically allows the parties to mediation to prepare for an encounter with the other person or people in the conflict.¹⁵ In some cases the parties need no further intervention: the opportunity to reflect on the conflict with an experienced, non-judgmental outsider can provide sufficient insight for them to deal with the situation unaided. Some mediators use written material to assist people to prepare for mediation.¹⁶ The “pre-mediation playlist” could fulfil a similar role in helping a person to become clearer about their own thoughts and feelings and thus ready to negotiate. Such emotion-work can also contribute to the empowerment of individuals in conflict, defined by one leading mediation text thus:

13 Family Mediation West, in Glasgow, Scotland.

14 David D Burns, *The Feeling Good Handbook* (Revised Edition) (London: Penguin, 1999)

15 See Charlie Irvine, “Intake Interviews in Family Mediation: Some Thoughts from Scotland” *Mediation in Practice* (April 2003) 12-17. Available from http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=1823327

16 See for example the International Mediation Institute’s ‘Ole’ pre-mediation material - <http://imimediation.org/ole>

“They move out of weakness, becoming calmer, clearer, more confident, more articulate, and more decisive – in general shifting from weakness to strength.”¹⁷

A further step would be to share the playlist with the other person in the conflict. There are of course risks, especially if the conflict is bitter and longstanding. A playlist could be used to convey destructive and mistrustful messages, possibly without a mediator even detecting it. However, there is an equally strong chance that it will reveal a different facet of the person, perhaps a more vulnerable side, or a less absolute view. If people do render themselves vulnerable in this way, and the gesture is accepted, people have taken one crucial step in re-humanizing each other.

This may have two useful effects. First, each person has the opportunity to listen to the other person’s choices, at a place and time of their choosing. This “place and time of their choosing” is likely to lower the person’s emotional arousal, facilitating a response from the neocortex (associated with higher reasoning) rather than the more primitive limbic circuits in the brain (the classic “fight/flight” responses).¹⁸ These choices will deliver insight into the worldview of the “enemy,” almost certainly portraying a more nuanced emotional range (i.e. beyond anger and threat) than can be heard in typical verbal exchanges. Second, each person will know that the other has heard their musical choices. People in dispute often complain of not being heard: this intimate listening becomes a step towards untying the knot of intractable conflict, contributing to the “effort to join the parties to a dispute in an alliance against the effects of the conflict.”¹⁹ The next time the participants speak the conversation is likely to be altered through this non-verbal exchange. They may, at the very least, have greater insight into one another’s perspectives.

Conclusion

This article should properly be viewed as a “proposal for further research.” It requires to be tested in practice. It also forms part of a longer personal quest to take my conflict resolution practice beyond “mediating from the neck up.”²⁰ Rather than seeking to contain or “handle” emotions, I suggest that we need to embrace the physical and emotional realm which is so evidently manifest in conflict. It is my hope that we can learn to exploit the extraordinary capacity of MP3 players to act as a resource of memory and emotion. While not perhaps as obviously powerful as the act of making music together, for the many millions of music consumers this could expand and focus the long-observed healing power of music, and

17 Robert A Baruch Bush and Joseph P Folger, *The Promise of Mediation: The Transformative Approach to Conflict* (2nd Edition) (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2005) p.55 (italics in original)

18 I am grateful to Jeremy Lack for these ideas: see www.jeremylack.com

19 John Winslade and Gerald Monk, *Narrative Mediation: A New Approach to Conflict* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001), p.71

20 Irvine, 2011, p.3

harness it in tackling the endlessly perplexing phenomenon of conflict. To quote Stephen Stills: “Music sets an atmosphere for reason to occur in conjunction with passion.”²¹

References - See footnotes

21 David Crosby & David Bender, *Stand and be counted: Making music, making history*. (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2000) cited in Mindy Kay Johnston *Music and Conflict Resolution: Exploring the Utilization of Music in Community Engagement*. (Unpublished Masters Thesis, Portland State University)