

CONNECT & CO-CREATE!

The 2021 Oregon Mediation Association Annual Conference has come and gone. Michelle Helman, Founder and Principal Consultant at Michelle Helman Consulting, LLC, led a virtual workshop, *Connect & Co-Create!* on November 6th. For folks who attended or who may have missed it, here is a brief write-up about it to share some tips, tools, and resources.



ABOUT THE SESSION

In this skill-strengthening workshop, attendees actively participated in learning about and utilizing improvisation techniques necessary to move beyond settler-created themes of neutrality toward co-liberation. Together, we co-created a space that provided the opportunity to connect via our shared humanity through play, curiosity, and imagination.



INTRODUCTIONS

Group Agreements. After logistics and housekeeping, we each renamed ourselves as a period or a dot (.) and typed into the chat what we each needed to make the virtual space be as safe, engaging, accessible, fun, and productive as possible.



TIP: *the dot factor keeps it anonymous. RE: consent, Michelle added:*

Whatever is shared here stays here, what is learned here leaves here.

Only share your own story, not anyone else's story.

Rename yourself as your superpower. Yes, literally a superpower you have, from baking croissants to speed walking. Rather than hierarchical job titles and surnames, let's get human.



TIP: *This is a fast-track way to start to get to know each other.*

Dyad interviews. Making time to talk one-on-one does make a difference! In pairs, each person had the option to 1) Share more about their superpower, 2) Pick an object from their space and share something it means about them, and 3) Share something boring or weird about themselves.



TIP: *Depending on the number of people in the room and time you have for the session or meeting, breakout rooms can be key and 99% of the time, people want more time to talk.*

CONTEXT

Many conflict resolution professionals are positioned to facilitate a process for participants to co-create their own outcomes. Practicing and applying **improvisation skills** can strengthen our capacity to critically reflect, deconstruct, engage, and re-imagine how we engage with and influence the process. Awareness of dynamics not only between parties, but as oneself as the mediator and as a human in the room requires critical reflection on power and privilege as well as assumptions, biases, cultural conditioning, and more. In this workshop, we explored some of these concepts through applied practice.

Improvisation concepts can be applied outside of the theater and are particularly useful and applicable in social justice, change, and equity processes when working with power dynamics.



TIP: For more, see *Theater of the Oppressed* and the work of Freire and Boal. Some core concepts and approaches include:

- Work with uncertainty and imagination to adapt to ‘real world’ complexity
- Willingness to change and adapt; Mistakes are gifts
- Self-awareness as a decolonizing practice
- Activities and games lower status and change power dynamics

Neutrality, as a concept and practice, can serve to uphold dominant power structures as it can privilege what is accepted or imposed as common sense or status-quo. To decolonize, dismantle and re-imagine the mediation and conflict resolution field, examining one’s lived experience with privilege and power is a necessary step. Understanding social hierarchies and socialized expectations around race, gender, class, ability, etc. AND how we respond via behaviors can support the process of unlearning and co-creating an equitable and just world.

Co-liberation as a process and praxis, requiring reflection, imagination, and action. We worked with this workshop by asking and imagining: *How can we co-create and inhabit a space and participate in a way that centers relationships and leads to increased understanding, empathy, and acknowledging our differences and shared humanity?*



ACTIVITIES

We explored the following questions by practicing a few activities, outlined below:

- ◆ What actions might we take to engage with the concepts noted above?
- ◆ What do those spaces look like? How do we inhabit them?
- ◆ How can we actively co-create them?



First letter, last letter

A listening exercise in pairs where the 1st person says a sentence. The 2nd person must start the next sentence with the last letter of the last word person 1 said, and continue from there. This activity requires active listening rather than waiting for your turn to talk. For example:

Person 1: Relationship building can be hard sometimes.

Person 2: Sure, I can relate, especially at work.

Person 1: Knowing that...



Dictionary

In groups of three, one person comes up with a new word, the second person gives the word a definition, and the third person uses the word in a sentence.



TIP: *Let this process be organic and change the order if that is what feels right. This activity requires some creativity and imagination.*



Yes, and...

'Yes, and' is a key concept and practice in improvisation. However, a critical analysis and adaptation is essential to prevent harm done by assuming and considering whose boundaries and consent are centered and privileged through power structures and systems of oppression such as settler colonialism, racism, capitalism patriarchy and other 'isms'. A deeper dive here is necessary, and beyond the scope of this workshop. Here's how we worked with 'Yes, and':

ROUND 1: Person 1: Makes an offer, ex. *Let's have a birthday party.*

Person 2: Says no.

ROUND 2: Person 1: Let's have a birthday party.

Person 2: Says yes, but..., ex. *Yes, but end by 8pm so I can go to sleep early.*

ROUND 3: Person 1: Let's have a birthday party.

Person 2: Says yes, and..., ex. *Yes, and let's make cupcakes!*

→ After each activity we had space for **debrief** as a whole group. To conclude, we co-created a piece of art using the whiteboard function on Zoom that answered and represented *What does our collaboration, connection, and co-creation look like for us?*



To learn more, offer feedback, ask a question, or just generally connect, please visit:

<https://www.michellehelman.com/>

Content for this workshop was sourced and adapted from activities Michelle has learned over 20+ years of facilitation work from peers, colleagues, mentors, and teachers and many are available for online, as well as from:

Dias, Annalisa. *Decolonizing "Diversity" on Campus Using Applied Improvisation*. (2018). Applied Improvisation. eds. Theresa Robbins Dudeck and Caitlin McClure.

Press, Sharon and Deason, Ellen E., "Mediation: Embedded Assumptions of Whiteness?" (2021). Faculty Scholarship. 494. <https://open.mitchellhamline.edu/facsch/494>

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