

Teaching Mediation Skills in Construction Engineering Education: Preparing Students for Conflict-Intensive Work Environments

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Abstract

Disputes are common on construction projects, often triggered by scope changes, design clarifications, or disagreements over cost and schedule impacts. These conflicts can delay work, raise costs, and strain working relationships. Mediation is widely used in construction as a form of alternative dispute resolution (ADR), yet it is seldom taught as a hands-on exercise in construction classrooms. That gap leaves students with limited practice in a process they are likely to encounter early in their careers.

This paper describes a classroom assignment that introduced mediation in an upper-level construction management course focused on construction law and contract administration. The class enrolled about 45 students, composed primarily of construction engineering technology majors, with a smaller number of graduate students and several from design-oriented programs. Students were organized into eight teams of about six (with limited role sharing where needed). Roles included the general contractor's project manager and superintendent, the mechanical subcontractor's project manager and superintendent, a design consultant, and a mediator. Each team worked on a realistic case involving a disputed VAV system upgrade that required an additional 120 linear feet of custom ductwork, revised piping, and a more advanced control system. Materials provided to students consisted of a narrative case packet paired with AIA A201 General Conditions to anchor discussion of scope, changes, and claims.

The assignment had two parts. Teams first held an in-person mediation outside class with a 75-minute target duration and caucuses permitted. Student mediators used a sample opening statement handout and were instructed to facilitate the process, but not to propose settlement options or assign fault. Each team produced a one-page settlement memo stating agreed scope actions, responsible party, timing, and cost terms without admissions of liability. Teams then returned to class for a 10-minute presentation, followed by a brief question-and-answer period to explain their resolutions, describe key turning points, and justify cost and schedule adjustments using case facts and relevant contract language.

Structured instructor observation notes from the eight team presentations were reviewed to identify recurring implementation patterns that can inform facilitation and debriefing. All eight teams reached agreement, most commonly through cost-sharing structures, and about half also included schedule relief. Observed patterns included role-dependent framing of disputes as multi-issue rather than purely clause-based, predictable communication breakdowns under conflict, the difficulty of mediator neutrality and meeting control without structure, and the importance of preparation and contract-grounded reasoning for producing workable resolutions. The paper provides a low-cost mediation assignment template and instructor-observed implementation patterns to support adaptation and replication; transferability beyond this course context remains to be tested through additional offerings and cohorts.

Introduction

Disputes are a routine feature of construction projects. Scope changes, design clarifications, and questions about cost and schedule create frequent tension among project participants. These disputes often escalate into claims and formal dispute-resolution efforts that consume significant management time and project resources [1]–[3]. Mediation is widely used in the construction sector as a form of alternative dispute resolution (ADR) because it can preserve relationships and reduce the time and cost associated with traditional litigation or arbitration [1], [4], [5]. However, while mediation is now common in practice, it is not yet a regular, hands-on component of many construction engineering and management curricula. In many construction law courses, students read about ADR and analyze cases, but they seldom must sit at a table, hold a position, and work through a live dispute from within a project role.

Prior work has noted a general need for more education in ADR and dispute-resolution skills [6]. In construction-specific contexts, others have argued that the teaching of construction law in universities is often disconnected from the realities of practice, with limited emphasis on how disputes are actually managed on projects [7]. At the same time, evidence indicates that experiential legal exercises, such as mock arbitrations and courtroom simulations, help construction management students develop professional communication and legal reasoning skills [8], [9]. Role-based simulations and structured learning activities have also been used to support mediation training in engineering and construction settings [10]. Together, this work suggests that carefully designed, practice-oriented exercises can shift students from passively learning legal concepts to actively applying them.

Despite this work, there remains relatively little published on mediation-focused assignments in undergraduate construction programs, particularly activities that require students to assume the roles of contractor, subcontractor, design professional, and mediator in a realistic project dispute. In addition, the growing research on construction mediation emphasizes the complexity of interests, information, and constraints that mediators must manage [3], [4], [5]. For construction educators, this creates a practical instructional need for replicable classroom activities that expose students to multi-party disputes, role-based priorities, and the process constraints that shape mediated resolutions, before students encounter these situations in practice.

This paper is presented as a teaching practice contribution with three aims: (1) document a replicable mediation role-play grounded in a realistic mechanical scope-change scenario; (2) describe recurring implementation patterns observed across eight team presentations to inform instructor facilitation and debriefing; and (3) discuss practical implications for integrating mediation training into construction engineering and management curricula.

Background and Related Work

Construction disputes have been widely studied from legal, technical, and management perspectives. Classic work on mediation in construction emphasized the potential of facilitated negotiation to resolve disputes more efficiently than litigation, while still addressing technical complexity and contract constraints [1]. More recent studies highlight how parties' willingness to engage in voluntary processes and the design of dispute systems influence resolutions [2], [5]. A recent bibliometric review of claim management and dispute resolution research shows increasing attention to mediation and other ADR mechanisms in the built environment but also notes gaps in empirical work on practice and education [3].

Educational literature has repeatedly argued that students entering construction and engineering practice need better preparation in ADR and negotiation. Ezulike discussed the need for ADR education in a general professional context, pointing to a limited understanding of mediation and negotiation among graduates [6]. In construction, Gerber argued that the teaching of construction law often focuses on doctrinal issues while overlooking how disputes are handled on projects, including negotiation and mediation processes [7]. Together, these studies indicate a persistent gap between what students learn in law-related courses and how conflicts are resolved in practice.

Experiential and simulation-based approaches have been among the responses to this gap. Arneson and Ozbek [8] reported on a mock arbitration exercise for construction management students, finding that role-play in a quasi-legal setting helped students develop advocacy, evidence handling, and professional communication skills. Biering [9] described a “day in court” activity that employed contract-dispute scenarios in a construction management course, again reporting gains in students’ understanding of the legal process and dispute framing. Qu and Cheung [10] developed a pedagogical principle-based e-learning environment for construction mediation training, combining structured scenarios and online tools to immerse students in mediation processes. These examples show that a carefully designed assignment can make dispute-resolution topics more concrete by requiring students to apply concepts under role constraints.

Parallel to these educational efforts, research on construction mediation itself has matured. Ilter et al. proposed a research roadmap for construction mediation that highlights questions around process design, stakeholder behavior, and integration with project delivery systems [5]. Practice-oriented texts also summarize mediation theory and process choices for construction professionals [4]. Taken together, this body of work supports classroom activities that reflect how mediation operates in construction, including multi-party interests, information constraints, and the need for structured facilitation.

The assignment presented in this paper builds on these strands by embedding a mediation role-play in a construction management course and linking ADR education goals with realistic project roles and contract-based constraints. The paper is positioned as a teaching practice contribution, emphasizing replicable implementation features and instructor-observed process patterns that can guide facilitation and debriefing.

Course Context and Assignment Design

The mediation assignment was implemented in a required upper-level construction management course focused on construction law and contract administration. The course enrolled approximately 45 students, consisting primarily of undergraduate construction engineering technology majors, with a small number of graduate students and several students from design-oriented programs such as architecture, architectural engineering, interior design, and civil engineering. The course covers contract fundamentals, project delivery methods, claims, and dispute resolution mechanisms, including negotiation, mediation, arbitration, and litigation.

The mediation assignment was introduced after students had completed lectures and readings on contract changes, claims, and ADR. The learning objectives for the assignment were to help

students: (1) recognize the sources and dynamics of disputes on construction projects; (2) practice communicating within and across project roles under conflict; (3) experience the mediator's function in facilitating dialogue; and (4) reflect on how documentation and contract language support or constrain resolution.

The scenario centered on a mechanical scope change involving a variable air volume (VAV) system upgrade. The case described a typical commercial building project in which the owner requested a late-stage change from a standard VAV system to a more advanced configuration. The change required roughly 120 linear feet of custom ductwork, revised piping, and a more complex control system. The contractor and mechanical subcontractor disagreed over responsibility for the extra work, the magnitude of the cost and time impacts, and whether certain items were within the original scope. Materials provided to students consisted of a narrative case packet and the standard AIA A201 General Conditions used in the course. The case was intentionally document-light to keep the emphasis on role-based negotiation and contract-grounded reasoning rather than detailed quantity takeoff.

Students were organized into eight teams, generally of six members. Roles were assigned using an in-class sign-up based on student preference. Within each team, students were assigned to the following roles: general contractor's project manager, general contractor's superintendent, mechanical subcontractor's project manager, mechanical subcontractor's superintendent, design consultant, and mediator. When a team did not have six members, the general contractor or subcontractor field and office roles were combined to maintain coverage of all parties. Students in engineering-focused majors were preferentially assigned to the design consultant role when available. Students were instructed to prepare by reviewing the case packet, AIA A201 provisions relevant to changes and claims, and the responsibilities associated with their roles.

The assignment had two main parts. In the first part, each team conducted an in-person mediation session outside of class time with a target duration of 75 minutes. The mediator was responsible for opening the session, setting ground rules, guiding issue identification, and managing the process so that parties could negotiate terms. Student mediators were provided a sample mediator opening statement as a preparation aid and adapted it for course use [11]. Caucuses were permitted. Mediators were instructed not to propose settlement options and not to assign fault, but instead to facilitate communication, test understanding, and document any agreed terms. Each team was required to produce a one-page settlement memo stating what would be done, who would do it, by when, and for how much money, without any admission of liability. Figure 1 summarizes the sequence of the mediation module from role assignment through instructor debrief.

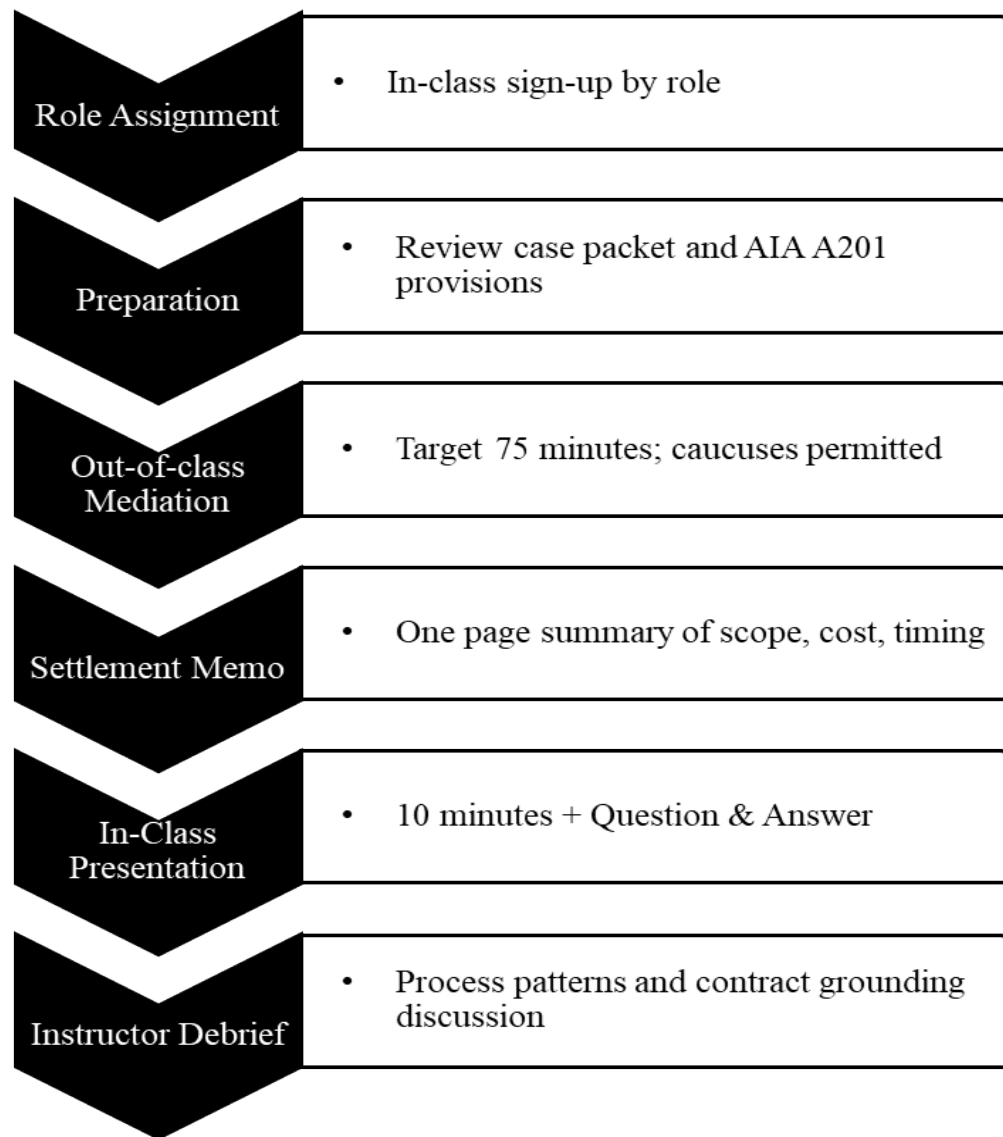


Figure 1. Mediation assignment process flow (role assignment through debrief)

In the second part, teams reconvened in class to present their resolutions. Each team delivered a 10-minute presentation followed by approximately 2 to 5 minutes of questions. Presentations were expected to: (1) summarize the dispute as understood by the team; (2) describe key steps and turning points in the mediation; (3) present the agreed resolution, including any cost and schedule adjustments; and (4) reflect briefly on what went well and what was challenging in the process. Presentations were evaluated on clarity of explanation, appropriate use of the case facts and contract language, balanced participation across roles, the plausibility and workability of the resolution, and overall delivery. After the presentations, students submitted short individual reflections as a normal course deliverable to support debriefing and grading.

To support replication, Table I provides an implementation snapshot of the module, including participants, roles, materials, timing, deliverables, process rules, and assessment and debrief approach.

TABLE I. IMPLEMENTATION SNAPSHOT FOR MEDIATION ROLE-PLAY MODULE

Element	Implementation details
Participants	Approximately 45 students in an upper-level construction management course on construction law and contract administration
Team structure	Eight teams, typically six students per team; if fewer than six, GC or subcontractor field and office roles were combined
Roles	General contractor project manager; general contractor superintendent; mechanical subcontractor project manager; mechanical subcontractor superintendent; design consultant; mediator
Materials	Narrative case packet describing a VAV scope-change dispute; AIA A201 General Conditions (course contract); mediator opening statement handout adapted for course use [11]
Timing	Out-of-class mediation: in-person, target duration 75 minutes; in-class presentations: 10 minutes per team plus approximately 2 to 5 minutes of questions
Deliverables	One-page settlement memo stating agreed scope actions, responsible party, timing, and cost terms without admissions of liability; in-class team presentation; short individual reflection (collected for course use but not analyzed or quoted in the paper)
Process rules	Caucuses permitted; mediators instructed to facilitate process and document terms, but not to propose settlement options and not to assign fault
Assessment and debrief	Presentations evaluated on clarity, use of case facts and relevant contract language, balanced participation, plausibility and workability of resolution, and delivery; instructor tracked settlement patterns during presentations and used remaining class time for whole-class debrief comparing solution structures

Methods

This paper is presented as a teaching practice report. Evidence comes from instructor-generated implementation records rather than analysis of individual student learning. During each team's in-class presentation (eight teams total), the instructor used a structured observation template to record visible mediation-process elements and how teams anchored their positions in the case narrative and applicable AIA A201 contract language. Observation categories included issue framing, turn-taking and participation balance, mediator process moves (opening and ground rules, summarizing, reframing, and time management), the extent to which settlement options were generated by the parties, and how teams justified cost and schedule positions. Brief follow-up memos were added immediately after each presentation to capture implementation details that affect replication, including time management, role coverage, and recurring points of confusion.

After the activity, the instructor reviewed the compiled observation notes and follow-up memos to identify recurring implementation patterns that could inform facilitation and debriefing in future offerings. Findings are reported as instructor-observed patterns and replication-oriented implementation notes, not as measured learning outcomes. Individual student reflections were collected as a normal course deliverable to support grading and debriefing, but they were not systematically analyzed or quoted in this paper. No student names, quotations, or individually identifiable information are included. This instructional activity was part of normal course instruction and was determined exempt by the institution; the paper reports only de-identified instructor observations.

Findings

Instructor observation notes from eight team presentations were reviewed to identify recurring patterns in how teams framed issues, managed the mediation process, and anchored their positions in the case narrative and applicable contract language. All eight teams reached an agreement documented in a one-page settlement memo. Cost-sharing was the most common structure, and about half of teams also included schedule relief. Four recurring implementation patterns are presented here: (1) disputes were framed as multi-issue and role-dependent rather than purely contractual; (2) communication under conflict created predictable process breakdowns that required mediator intervention; (3) the mediator role was difficult to execute without structure and time control; and (4) documentation and preparation strongly shaped the credibility of positions and the workability of resolutions.

1. Disputes were framed as multi-issue and role-dependent

Across teams, the instructor observed that students treated the dispute as more than a single contract interpretation question once they were required to speak from distinct project roles. Presentations commonly highlighted different priorities across field and office positions and across contractor and subcontractor perspectives. Within the same team, superintendent roles frequently emphasized schedule continuity and site workflow, while project manager roles emphasized scope definition, pricing, and recovery strategy. As teams described their mediation path, several shifted from an initial entitlement focus toward packaging issues and testing tradeoffs, such as partial cost sharing, sequence adjustments, or time-for-money exchanges. For replication, this pattern matters because it gives instructors a concrete way to debrief “interests versus positions” using familiar construction constraints rather than abstract negotiation language.

2. Communication under conflict created predictable process breakdowns

A second pattern was that teams often started with positional bargaining behaviors, including rapid demands and counter-demands, interruptions, and escalation in tone. Instructor notes more often documented clearer rationales in teams where mediators slowed the exchange and required parties to explain their rationale before proposing options. In presentations, teams described moments when misunderstandings about scope, responsibility, or contract interpretation drove the dispute more than the stated dollar amount. For replication, this is a useful debrief anchor because it gives instructors observable behaviors to discuss, such as listening, paraphrasing, and asking clarifying questions, without claiming measured communication gains.

3. The mediator role required structure, neutrality, and time control
A third pattern concerned mediator performance. Instructor notes indicate that mediators who used simple structure consistently (opening, ground rules, summarizing, reframing, and time management) maintained clearer turn-taking and participation balance. In contrast, sessions described as less structured in presentations tended to drift into direct argument between parties or become dominated by a small number of voices. Presentations from teams whose mediators maintained clearer process control more often described resolutions that appeared plausible within the project context and time limits. For replication, this pattern supports making mediator tools explicit in the assignment materials, such as an opening script and a short checklist of interventions that student mediators can use.
4. Documentation and preparation shaped credibility and resolution quality
Instructor notes indicate that teams who cited specific case facts and relevant AIA A201 provisions, and who brought approximate cost and schedule impacts into the discussion, were better able to justify their positions and defend the practicality of their resolution. Teams that relied on general statements had more difficulty keeping the discussion grounded and often offered weaker support for cost or schedule adjustments. For replication, this pattern supports a simple grading and debrief focus that aligns with construction law and contract administration course objectives. Dispute discussions are constrained by the project record, and parties need to support proposals with specific project facts and contract language.

Discussion and Implications

In this course offering, instructor observation notes from the eight team presentations indicate that teams often framed the dispute as more than a clause-interpretation question once they were required to speak from distinct project roles, and these shifts could be surfaced and discussed during debrief. When students defended positions from contractor, subcontractor, and design perspectives, presentations commonly highlighted competing priorities across field and office functions and across project participants. This observation aligns with prior calls to integrate experiential ADR education into professional programs [6], [7] and complements earlier work on mock arbitration and contract dispute simulations in construction management courses [8], [9]. It also mirrors construction mediation literature that emphasizes the role of interests, information, and constraints in shaping dispute trajectories [3], [5]. As a teaching practice contribution, the value is that these dynamics became visible in a controlled setting where the instructor could document and debrief them.

The observed process patterns also indicate that mediation role-play provides a concrete setting for instructors to address communication and negotiation behaviors without separating those behaviors from technical project content. Across teams, instructor notes documented early tendencies toward positional bargaining, rapid counteroffers, and incomplete explanation of rationale. In presentations describing more workable resolutions, teams described a shift toward clarifying assumptions, testing options, and tying proposals to schedule and scope impacts. These behaviors align with the skill domains emphasized in prior experiential legal exercises in construction programs, including structured argumentation, professional communication, and dispute framing [8], [9], [10]. For instructors, the implication is practical. This assignment

creates observable moments to discuss listening, paraphrasing, and interest-based questioning in the context of a mechanical change dispute rather than as generic “soft skills.”

A third implication is the centrality of the mediator role as an instructional lever. Instructor notes indicate that mediation sessions were more structured when student mediators used basic process moves such as opening statements, ground rules, summarizing, reframing, and directing turn-taking. When mediators did not impose structure, conversations more often drifted into direct argument between parties or became dominated by a small number of voices. This pattern is consistent with practice-oriented guidance that emphasizes mediator neutrality paired with active process management [4]. For replication, the takeaway is straightforward. In this implementation, instructor notes indicated that sessions were more structured when student mediators used a simple opening script or checklist, caucuses were available as needed, and the debrief explicitly addressed mediator process choices.

The consistent role of documentation and preparation is another implementation-relevant finding. Instructor notes show that teams who referenced the case facts and relevant AIA A201 provisions, and who incorporated basic cost or time impacts, were better able to justify positions and defend the plausibility of their proposed resolution. Teams that relied on general statements struggled to maintain credibility in both the mediation narrative and the presentation defense. This reinforces a core message in construction law and contract administration courses, namely that dispute discussions are constrained by the project record and by the parties’ ability to support positions with specific facts and contract language. In this module, preparation becomes visible because the practicality of the resolution depends on it during both the mediation and the presentation.

For construction engineering and management educators, the assignment offers a low-cost and adaptable structure for integrating mediation into an existing law and contract administration course. The core elements that support replication are the role set, a narrative case packet paired with AIA A201 contract language, an out-of-class mediation with a 75-minute target duration and a required one-page settlement memo, and an in-class presentation format of 10 minutes plus approximately 2 to 5 minutes of questions. The case facts can be adapted to local project types, and roles can be adjusted to reflect different delivery methods or contractual relationships, while keeping the same instructional purpose. The recurring patterns reported here can also function as instructor observation indicators and debrief prompts that guide facilitation and debriefing, including how teams frame issues, whether mediators use process tools, and how consistently teams anchor proposals in contract language and case facts. If future work is pursued, the module also supports more systematic study designs, such as comparing implementation across cohorts or testing structured mediator supports, but the present paper’s primary contribution is a replicable teaching practice model grounded in observed classroom implementation.

Limitations

This teaching practice report documents a single implementation of the mediation assignment in one upper-level course context (approximately 45 students; eight teams) using one case scenario. The descriptive patterns reported here are based on a single instructor’s structured observation notes from team presentations and do not include systematic analysis of individual student reflections or other independent measures of learning. As a result, the findings should be

interpreted as instructor-observed implementation patterns and debrief prompts, not as evidence of effectiveness or as results that necessarily transfer to other disciplines, course formats, or student populations. Replication across additional offerings and contexts, including non-construction cohorts, and use of consistent observation and artifact-coding procedures would help clarify what elements generalize and what elements are course- or case-specific.

Conclusion

This paper presents a mediation-focused classroom assignment for an upper-level construction management course and reports descriptive findings based on instructor observation notes from eight team presentations. The assignment required students to assume the roles of contractor, subcontractor, design consultant, and mediator in a realistic mechanical scope-change dispute. Teams completed a 75-minute out-of-class mediation that concluded with a one-page settlement memo, then returned to class for a 10-minute presentation followed by a short question-and-answer period.

Instructor observations across the presentations suggest that, in this implementation, the role-play surfaced disputes as multi-sided and role-dependent rather than purely clause-driven, highlighted predictable communication breakdowns under conflict, and made the mediator's process responsibilities and limits visible. Instructor observations also suggested the practical importance of preparation and contract-grounded reasoning, since presentations from teams that relied on specific case facts and relevant contract provisions more often included clearer justification of cost and schedule positions and the plausibility of their agreements. These process patterns map to competencies expected of graduates entering a construction industry in which disputes are common and mediation is a widely used ADR mechanism.

Future work will replicate the mediation assignment across multiple offerings and student populations, including cohorts outside construction, to examine transferability and to distinguish essential from optional design elements. A follow-on study can also add structured analysis of student reflections and artifacts using consistent prompts and coding rubrics across cohorts, alongside an instructor observation protocol, to better characterize how students engage with the mediation roles and process. Additional iterations may test variations in case complexity and mediator supports, and explore sequencing the mediation with complementary experiential activities such as contract negotiation simulations, while keeping core process rules constant to enable meaningful comparison.

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