

FACILITATION: A TOOL FOR EVOKING AND CREATING WISDOM

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Strictly speaking, this is not a story like most of the other posts. It is an article I wrote in 2003 at the request of a journal that supports inter-cultural education. They were using the term facilitation for participatory, experiential learning experiences. The confusion between facilitating learning and process facilitation has been around for a long time, and I wanted to both address the similarities and the differences between the two. There are a number of stories embedded in this article. When I discovered it again, I thought it might be useful to share.

Facilitating Diversity

Several years ago, I was facilitating a workshop at a conference of multi-cultural organizations in Ontario, to demonstrate some practical tools of facilitation. I had made a point of sharing my "working assumptions" for facilitating groups, which include "Everyone has wisdom" and "We need everyone's wisdom for the wisest result". About 20 adults, representing a good cross-section of the world, were actively participating in envisioning what they wanted our multicultural society to look like, brainstorming and sharing their ideas on cards on the wall. My youngest son, then about 7 years old, had accompanied me as it was a Saturday and I hadn't been able to find child care. He was quietly playing with his Legos in the back corner. Suddenly, one of the participants said, pointing at my son, "What does he think? After all, it's the next generation who will benefit and continue this!"

I called out, "Tim, what do you want our multicultural society to look like in 5 years?" He thought for a moment, then said, "Can I have three colours of markers?" I said, "Sure" and handed them to him. He took a card and drew 3 stick figures of different colours dancing together.

The card went up on the wall and clustered with all the cards that said that we would be working and playing together in our multicultural society.

We were all astounded that a child's spontaneous non-verbal contribution could add richness to the product of the adults, although in retrospect, we shouldn't have been surprised.

What is Facilitation?

The word facilitation is used to mean many different things. Its roots are in the Latin "facil", to make easy. A shoehorn that eases a heel into a shoe "facilitates" putting on your shoe.

There are two common meanings of the term "facilitation" as a way of working with groups. On the one hand, facilitation is seen as a way of guiding group activity so that active learning

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takes place, based on the knowledge and understanding that individuals bring to the training. On the other hand, process facilitation draws out a group's already existing wisdom to solve a problem or create a solution that the group needs.

Facilitating Learning

In facilitating learning, the trainer has content objectives that s/he wants the group to know by the end of the session, and/or behaviour s/he wishes the participants to change. But the trainer starts with an assumption that s/he is not the only expert in the room. Participants have ideas and knowledge that are a starting point to build on. The trainer may guide the group to reflect on past experiences and draw out insight, through the use of carefully constructed questions that are both respectful and take people beyond their previous thinking.

Occasionally a talk, a video, or even a story may be the starting point. With experiential learning, the trainer provides an experience for the group first, then guides the reflection on that experience. That experience may be an exercise or activity the group does together.

In such an approach to education, the job of the teacher may become easier and harder at the same time. In many ways, guiding the students to build their own knowledge through reflection relieves the teacher of the burden of knowing all the answers. However, it also removes the "cookbook" approach of teaching, where there is simply data to be downloaded from the text and the teacher into the student. Instead, the teacher becomes a catalyst to a three-part dialogue (or triologue) process between the information, the student, and the teacher. When students and the teacher reflect together, everyone learns.

Although this kind of facilitated learning is often referred to as using "adult learning principles", my experience is that they are true for all ages, and provide for learning that translates into real-life behaviour and choices.

Wayne Nelson summarized some of these learning principles in this way:

People participate at their best when:

- They are comfortable.
- An attractive, comfortable atmosphere invites participation.
- Emotional and social comfort help people participate.
- Modes of involvement that match people's unique social style and learning styles, enable them to engage with ease.
- When people are able to express their perceptions, feelings and thoughts freely, they are more likely to become involved.
- Acknowledging, receiving and affirming people's ideas allows them to share their deeper thoughts and feelings.

- When people are emotionally, intellectually and spiritually stimulated, they participate more readily.
- Things make sense to them.
- When the topic under consideration and the process builds on their own knowledge and experience, people can easily join the discussion.
- Understanding the stages of the planned group process gives people a way to see how their contributions fit in a larger picture.
- When people understand and are aligned with the purpose of the meeting, they can see value in contributing.
- Situations and processes that reflect people's principles, values and ethics provide people with freedom to think widely.
- When the connections between people's real, personal experience and the questions being raised are clear, participation is more likely to be grounded in reality. They believe they can make a difference.
- Topics related directly to people's concerns, interests and hopes for the future stimulate their engagement.
- If the results will make a positive impact on their own lives, people are likely to participate positively.
- People who believe that their contribution to the discussions will make a positive difference in their situation and in the lives of others participate with creativity.
- When people are able to use their knowledge and experience to create new meaning, they participate with creativity and passion.
- When people know they will be involved in implementing the plans and decisions they make, they participate with commitment.

Guiding Reflection

In my practice, I find that the core skill that makes facilitated learning powerful is the capacity to guide the reflective thinking process that integrates people's experience with their real lives. A very helpful process starts with questions that ask people to recall their observations of their experience, then questions that get out their immediate reactions, then questions that probe for meaning, significance, learnings and relevance, and finally questions that elicit decision and action. At each stage, the facilitator listens respectfully and actively to the responses.

The Institute of Cultural Affairs, a global NGO, has been developing and using this process, which it calls "The Focused Conversation Method", for nearly 50 years with communities, education groups, and organizations.

One summer nearly 30 years ago, I was teaching a pre-school group at a summer camp. I had the four-year-olds recite the familiar nursery rhyme, "Little Miss Muffet". Then we had a brief conversation on the rhyme, roughly as follows:

Objective Questions

- * "What words don't you understand?" (tuffet, curds and whey, which I explained)
- * "Who were the characters?" (Little Miss Muffet, the spider)
- * "What happened first? Then...Then...?"
- * "What did Miss Muffet do when she was frightened?"

Reflective Questions

- * "Where have you experienced something like this?"

One child said that his mother made him eat cottage cheese, and he hated it. Several children had stories of scary surprises, and their reactions.

Interpretive Questions

Then I asked,

- * "What is this story all about?"

One little girl thought for a second, then her eyes lit up. "This is about ... when you get scared, you can decide if you're going to run away, or not!"

Decisional Questions

She finished up with "Next time, I will decide by myself what to do!"

I was astounded. This tiny child had seen far below the surface of this rhyme to a meaning that had relevance to her own life. Her capacity to abstract meaning, or to access a higher level of thinking, was empowered by the step-by-step thinking process of the Focused Conversation method.

This method facilitates learning, as it starts with the obvious and most easily accessed information and moves step by step through to higher levels of thinking, thus extending students' capacity to think abstractly.

The following conversation on an experiential learning exercise is taken from "The Art of Focused Conversation for Schools". It could be adapted to follow any group experience, such as a ropes course, or a cultural encounter.

Reflecting on a Group Experience

Situation

A group of young people has participated in an unusual kinesthetic experience called "The Dance of Peace". Some were reluctant participants; others were deeply moved. After lunch, the trainer is leading the group in a debriefing of their experience.

Rational Aim

- * To clarify what we did.
- * To discover common motifs and themes.
- * To identify the cultural origins of dance patterns.

Experiential Aim

- * To experience the wonder of each culture's contribution, and to feel the exhilaration of the dance.

Opening

Think back to the dancing we did this morning.

Objective Questions

- * What movements do you remember?
- * What did the movement look like?
- * What dances did we do?
- * What sounds do you recall? What instruments were used?

Reflective Questions

- * How did you feel as you were dancing?
- * At what point did you feel unsure, confused, or embarrassed?
- * At what point did you feel excited, deeply moved, or peaceful?
- * When did you really "get into it"?
- * Where have you seen or experienced something similar?
- * What did this remind you of?

Interpretive Questions

- * What was going on in this dance?
- * Why do you think the creator of these dances created them?
- * What were they trying to express or communicate?
- * What kind of experiences were they trying to provide for people?

What can we learn from these dances?

- * How were you changed by this experience?

Decisional Questions

- * To whom would you like to teach these dances?
- * Where would you like to see them used again?
- * Whom do you wish had been here this morning?

Closing

When we started, I felt silly. After it was over, I thought, "This was fantastic."

When the facilitator crafts the questions carefully in advance, imagining what kind of responses the group will give to them, this reflective process will work well for any age group. Respectful questioning and listening are skills that can be nurtured and practiced by professionals and volunteers alike.

Group Process Facilitation

Facilitation at its best is the art of drawing out ordinary, everyday people's wisdom. Then it helps a group acknowledge and understand differences and see the deeper patterns of similarity. That allows the group to create consensus and results that are wiser than any one person would have come up with alone.

This facilitation is "process" facilitation, which I believe is absolutely critical to building respectful understanding. In this kind of facilitation, the facilitator has no agenda except that which the group wants and needs. It is not training, though learning will also occur. The facilitator's role is to guide the way the group shares ideas, listens, and processes information, so that the group comes up with the decision or result that it needs. The best facilitator is nearly invisible – the group believes it has accomplished its objectives by itself, and surely it has. But the facilitator has brought the tools, process, and presence to inspire the best from the group. A group without an assigned facilitator may well be able to manage its dialogue to come up with a well-thought-through consensus. But not every group can do that, and I know of no group who can do that well all of the time.

I believe this kind of facilitation has its roots in traditional consensus creation that emerged from small groups of people in different cultures. Many discovered that if they sat around a fire, or in a circle, and created opportunities for everyone to speak and really listen, they could make difficult decisions that everyone was committed to supporting. Some of us facilitate naturally, others of us yearn for it in difficult group sessions without knowing exactly what is missing.

In the last few hundred years, we have fallen into a pattern of seeing the world as dualistic: there is us and them, government and opposition, good and bad, right and wrong, black and white, "my way or the highway", etc. When we see the world that way, our pattern of responding leads to argument, and to either winning or losing. Defense or attack results, and we get locked into our own pre-conceived positions. If we look at the world as a multi-faceted reality, like a diamond with many facets, we find ourselves looking to polish and illuminate many perspectives to find the wisest solution to a problem. The "what if we tried a third (or another) way of looking at this" question allows us to bypass argument about right and wrong positions. An even more radical way of processing differences looks for the synthesis of quite unique ideas to create a larger picture out of diverse pieces of the puzzle. Both of these ways of creating consensus contribute to real peace as they don't gloss over differences, but rather build on them as creative stepping-stones to solutions and understanding.

The group process facilitator believes that the group has all the wisdom it needs to solve its own problems. It is important to have as many stakeholders represented as possible to make sure every angle of insight can contribute to the solution. Often this means examining all our categories of people who are "the enemy" or "can't participate" for one reason or another. I recall a facilitated consultation nearly 30 years ago in an Egyptian village to plan its community development project. Men and women; non-literate village residents, highly educated urban Egyptians, and non-Arabic-speaking consultants from a range of different cultures sat down in the same room (well, tent) to pool their wisdom. Each of us had different ideas of what was possible or even necessary. Each of us had our reservations about what the others could contribute. All together we brainstormed our ideas, clustered them to see the patterns, and named what we had come up with. The villagers' passionate visions were augmented by "expert" ideas. The abstractions and overly technical visions of the "experts" were made realistic by the villagers' grounded ideas. The plan was "owned" by everyone present. Twenty years later, when I visited the project again, I could see how the village people and the outsiders had worked together to transform the community, and were still motivated and moving forward.

Preventing Conflict

Often I talk about facilitation as a relationship: "facilitation is to conflict resolution as health promotion is to medical healing". Facilitation often prevents conflict, as it can be an intervention before a conflict exists or becomes entrenched. It honours all the perspectives and all the people to come up with a satisfactory solution. In the same way, facilitation can

be a tool for healing conflict that has already begun. The culture of participation which facilitation supports has the capacity to transform how we treat each other, the feeling of having been heard and respected. One of the most often-repeated comments I hear after a facilitated event is, "I thought I was the only one who had those ideas! I know now I'm not alone!" Facilitating group participation also increases shared ownership and responsibility for decisions. If I participate in contributing to the naming of a problem and also to creating the solution to it, then I am already a part of the solution.

Conclusion

So whether you are building on the wisdom and experience of a group to extend their learning, or to create a product that they need, try spending most of the time asking the participants what they think. I have discovered a paradoxical truth recently: if you ask people for their wisdom and really listen, they think you are wise. And there's even an extension of that: if you ask people for their wisdom and really listen, you all get more wise.

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