Can you recognise a good facilitator when you see one?

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Introduction
Facilitation skills are important both for educational developers and for the academic staff they work with. The growth of active learning methods, the demands for students to be critically reflective and the increasing number of adult learners all mean that many lecturers are now working with groups in a way that enables students to discover what they want to learn for themselves.

This article outlines four different ways of exploring facilitation skills: behaviourism, critical thinking, sociopsychological models and transformative approaches. Different academics and different disciplines may be attracted by different approaches. Those who are interested in numbers and incline more towards looking for ‘hard evidence’ may prefer the behavioural approach. Those who look towards logic and philosophical inquiry may prefer the critical thinking approach. Humanistic psychologists have nurtured the socio-psychological approaches and those interested in the emancipatory nature of knowledge may find the transformative approaches helpful.

What is facilitation?
The facilitator is the midwife in the learning process, and just as midwives have to be skilled at ‘masterly inactivity’ so the skilled facilitator needs to know when and how to intervene and when to remain silent.

The root of the word facilitator comes from the Latin facilis which means ‘capable of being done’. Therefore the facilitator’s role is to create the conditions under which a task may be effectively carried out. It is the opposite of ‘to define’, ‘to limit’ or ‘to close down’.

The importance of who creates the knowledge is indicated in the diagram below. If the lecturer is coming from the left hand side of the diagram, they will be using a transmission skill base (demonstration, exposition, repetition, examination of knowledge retained and applied); if the lecturer is coming from the right hand side of the diagram they will be using a facilitative skill base (questioning, challenging, supporting, research supervision, co-operative inquiry).

Student creates the knowledge

Lecturer creates the knowledge

Diagram 1: the sliding scale in the transmission of knowledge

Four approaches to facilitation
The four approaches described below are not completely separate. There are aspects that ‘leak’ from one to another but I hope looking through different lenses enables further understanding.

1) Using behavioural analysis to identify facilitative skills
Behavioural analysis has permeated social psychology in many ways, and its approach is currently behind the use of ‘cognitive behavioural therapy’.

Bales (1950) produced a powerful method for the study of interpersonal engagement in small groups. He used two researchers to analyse group interaction, and compared their results to increase rater accuracy. For our purpose the work he did in examining group leaders’ interactions is the most relevant. He would measure two aspects: firstly, the portion of the total time that the leader spoke and secondly, the types of interaction that the leader made.

The table used to create interactive profiles is show below, and the columns on the right hand side are used to mark the number of interventions in each category by each member of the group.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Facilitator</th>
<th>Student A</th>
<th>Student B</th>
<th>Student C etc.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Shows solidarity</td>
<td>Raises other's status, gives help, reward</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Shows tension release</td>
<td>Jokes, laughs, shows satisfaction</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Agrees</td>
<td>Shows passive acceptance, understands, concurs, complies</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Gives suggestion</td>
<td>Direction, implying autonomy for other</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Gives opinion</td>
<td>Evaluation, analysis, expresses feeling, wish</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Gives orientation</td>
<td>Information, repeats, clarifies, confirms</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Asks for orientation</td>
<td>Information, repetition, confirmation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Asks for opinion</td>
<td>Evaluation, analysis, expression of feeling</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Asks for suggestion</td>
<td>Direction, possible ways of action</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Disagrees</td>
<td>Shows passive rejection, formality, withholds help</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Shows tension</td>
<td>Asks for help, withdraws out of field</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Shows antagonism</td>
<td>Deflates other's status, defends or asserts self</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Diagram 2: Interaction Process Analysis (Bales 1950 p.19)

www.seda.ac.uk
This table could be adapted for academic use. The work of Bales provides a useful sample of a diagnostic tool, but we should not expect it to say anything about the quality of the interaction.

2) The critical thinking model of facilitation

The critical thinking model of facilitation looks to an external logical framework to solve a problem. It is a systems approach. Critical thinking can, if it chooses, avoid the affective completely. Three examples are described briefly: Coverdale, Halpern and Egan.

Coverdale’s (Taylor, 1979) process relies on students learning by working together through a pre-set framework to solve an actual problem (real or contrived). It suggests that conflict can usually be resolved by going back to the agreed aims rather than involving any interpersonal analysis. The system and the process are the primary problem-solving tool.

The diagram below is the figure that small groups work to when they are being trained to apply Coverdale’s scheme.

![Diagram](https://www.seda.ac.uk)

As befits a counselling model, Egan highlights the importance of empathic relationships, and he suggests that the counsellor should tune in to the client and be tentative in sharing their understanding (Egan, p.114).

3) The psychosocial model of facilitation

This model assumes that where students come together voluntarily, learning will happen automatically if the relationships within the group are positive. The father of non-directive therapy, Rogers (1983), suggested that facilitators needed six role sets: they set the initial mood of the group, elicit and clarify individual and group purposes, regard themselves as a flexible resource, respond to both intellectual and emotional expressions from the group, share their personal feelings, and work to recognise and accept their own limitations.

There are many other models of group functioning and group relationships which focus on the interpersonal dynamics of an interactive group. One such model is called the FIRO-B (an abbreviation for Fundamental Interpersonal Relations Orientation – Behaviour). This model was devised by Will Schultz (1984 and 2004).

The model identifies the key motivators that drive behaviour and help transform a disparate group of individuals into a cohesive productive group. The model helps individuals to discover how their needs for participation, influence and closeness can be contributing to or detracting from their success as a learning group.

Schultz argues that if the key concepts of inclusion, control and openness are not attended to, group members will stop learning because they will feel ignored, humiliated or rejected or fight for more recognition (inclusion), influence and attention to their (emotional) needs.

Another psycho-social model concentrates on looking at the intent behind the intervention. Heron (2001) has written at length about facilitation and the six categories of interventions that he has identified. Like Egan, he intended his six category intervention analysis to be used in one-to-one situations, but it is a rich analysis and much is transferable to identifying skills for group facilitation.

The core of his argument is that the skilled facilitator makes an intervention competently, free from any hidden agendas, and knows exactly what the intent is behind their intervention. Unskilled facilitators are at risk of making manipulative, perverted or degenerate interventions.
Making interventions purely, and constantly being aware of our intentions, is a lifelong quest. Heron tries to help us by dividing interventions into those that he calls ‘facilitative’ and ‘authoritative’.

Facilitative interventions are those where the practitioner is seeking to enable the student to become more autonomous. Authoritative interventions are where the practitioner (facilitator) takes responsibility for and on behalf of the student. It is a positivist stance and is about raising consciousness, guiding behaviour and giving instructions.

It is easy to see from the above list that the skilled facilitator/academic teacher will need to be psychologically self-aware to understand their intentions when making any intervention. According to Heron, all categories are neutral in that if they are operated competently one is no better than another. His rider is that the facilitator must always be working from an underlying supportive attitude with the students.

Along with other writers, Heron (1999) has also looked at group processes. He identifies three models of facilitating: hierarchical, co-operative and autonomous. Within each model there are six different dimensions: planning, meaning-making, confronting, feeling, structuring and valuing.

For Heron some of the goals of facilitation are that the student will be able to direct and develop themselves, make informed judgements, be emotionally competent and self-aware.

He identifies a hierarchy of facilitator ‘states’. This is a way of identifying the level of ‘presence’ that the facilitator can portray. Levels 6 to 8 will be most meaningful for the learner and probably exhausting but rewarding for the facilitator:

1. Facilitator shows no interest or empathy in participant or subject matter – submerged in his/her own internal anxiety and concerns
2. Facilitator is fascinated by the subject, their own distress, or the participant, to the exclusion of all else
3. Facilitator’s attention is distracted, goes off in directions irrelevant to work in hand
4. Facilitator displaces their own distress, confusion or conflict on to student by attacking, withdrawing, blaming, denial, complaining etc.
5. Control of attention energy: some attention for task in hand while remainder is buried, displaced, distracted etc.
6. Full attention directed to task in hand encompassing both own and participant’s needs
7. Attention for work in context, encompassing past and future, but immersed fully in task in hand
8. Attention for work in context at the engaged participant level and also at the disidentified witness/monitoring level.

4) Facilitation to support a transformative agenda

There are various theories about how we evolve our values or ambitions. Maslow (1954) was one of the early writers to identify a goal of ‘self-actualisation’. Perry (1970) produced a chart of development which suggested that students move from a position of basic duality, through multiplicity to commitment. Hall (1994) has suggested that adults shift their values as they grow from surviving, belonging, self-initiative to interdepending, and as they do that they move their leadership style through the following range: authoritarian, paternalist, managerial, facilitator, collaborator, and finally from servant to visionary.

Gregory takes our definition so far of facilitation (capable of being done) one stage further and argues that ‘facilitation...mean easing. “Easing”...helping learners get in touch with their internal capacities to learn and to make sense of their experiences’ (Gregory, 2002, p. 81). This definition becomes particularly interesting when we examine the role of the facilitator in transformation.

Gregory (2002 and 2006) writes that facilitation is an ancient art: it had a place in spiritual and monastic tradition in the form of guides, spiritual masters and spiritual directors, where it still flourishes. She adds:

‘Facilitation is the educational skill of accessing the phenomenological world of the individual, textured in social and cultural variables and helping the learner get in touch with their internal capacities to learn and to make sense of their experiences.’ (Gregory, 2006)

A transformative experience is one that enables the student to make a paradigm shift. It has similarities with the notion of threshold concepts (Meyer and Land 2002, Land et al. 2004, Meyer and Land 2005) in that once you have seen the world in this new way there is no way of going back. It is impossible then to perceive or believe that the world operates in the ‘old way’.

The fact that Meyer and Land call this ‘troublesome knowledge’ gives some clue to the skills that the academic tutor/facilitator needs to support some students whilst they travel through this threshold. Some of the language that Meyer and Land use in their work is also redolent of spirituality; they refer to transfiguration and transformation as well as highlighting the metacognitive requirement for the learner to become self-regulated.

Senge (1990) takes these boundaries one stage further when describing this transformative learning process as ‘metanoia’, and links it to ‘dia-logos’:

‘To grasp the meaning of metanoia is to grasp the deeper meaning of learning, for learning also involves a fundamental shift of mind.’ (p.10)

He links this ability to learn individually through groups to dia-logos:

‘...to the Greeks dia-logos meant a free flowing of meaning through a group allowing the group to discover insights not attainable individually.’ (p.10)

He also links this on to the concept of the learning organisation (and thereby makes explicit the premise that enabling staff to pursue the transformative agenda will enhance the employing organisation).

Enabling students to reframe their knowledge is a major task of the educator. Mezirow (1991) refers to this as ‘a meaning perspective’ (p. 46) and reminds us that the sociologist Erving
Goffman used the term 'frame' to refer to a shared definition of a situation that organises and governs social interaction.

Mezirow takes the question of how to understand knowledge firmly back to the philosopher. This would lead the facilitator to ask 'in how many ways can we disprove this' (after Popper), and 'can we make explicit what we are taking for granted' (looking for tacit knowledge, after Polanyi):

‘Popper and the transformation theorists agree that our efforts to understand the world generate the continuous testing of our most fundamental assumptions.’ (p. 41)

Brooks studied 29 managers who were identified as critically reflective by their peers. She identified what she called first and second order thinking. First order thinking involved empathically taking another person's or group's perspective and listening to intuition. Second order thinking included perspective taking, monitoring thought processes, gathering information and using analytical processes (Brooks 1989, in Mezirow 1991, p. 181). Here we begin to see the skills required of the transformative facilitator: they are a mix of the psycho-social and critical thinking skills combined at a high level.

What skills are important for each type of facilitation?
The table below begins to identify the skills needed to become a practised facilitator in one of the four dimensions.

| 1 Behavioural: | creating an appropriate code and classifying interventions, giving appropriate feedback and applying the implications of that coding to their own performance as a facilitator |
| 2 Critical thinking: | identifying appropriate critical thinking or problem solving processes and enabling the group or student to move along them |
| 3 Psycho-social: | self awareness, ability to identify the psychological processes that mitigate both for and against healthy group working |
| 4 Transformational: | an ability to encourage students to constantly reframe and question their understanding in order to broaden and deepen it, and to support students and learn from and with them |

The combination of models is intended to help the academic to question the governing variables of facilitation. It aims to support what Argyris and Schon (1974) would call double-loop learning rather than single-loop learning (where the chosen values, plans and rules are operationalised rather than questioned). Or, as Elton (2000) put it more pithily, it aims to avoid the danger of ‘doing the wrong things righter’.

References

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