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ALTERNATING BETWEEN TEACHER AND FACILITATOR

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Abstract

Participation in a group process or workshop is easily stifled when participants perceive a facilitator to prefer some ideas and outcomes over others. When insights emerge from the participants themselves, they become more invested in the process and the outcomes. But what should teachers who use facilitation techniques some of the time in their classes do to be perceived as facilitating not directing the class. Conversely, what should facilitators of any kind of group do when they see that a crucial insight is not emerging? This article describes the design of a workshop in which the participants—including myself—can learn from each other's experiences and insights regarding the tension between facilitating and "teaching" and the difficulties alternating between the two roles. The workshop consists of a series of activities for group interaction and intrapersonal reflection that should bring the experience and insight of



teacher-facilitators to the surface. References are provided so that readers can explore the activities further in their own work.

An Exploratory Workshop

Participation in a group process or workshop is easily stifled when participants perceive a facilitator to prefer some ideas and outcomes over others. When insights emerge from the participants themselves, they become more invested in the process and the outcomes. But what should teachers who use facilitation techniques some of the time in their classes do to be perceived as facilitating neutrally, not directing the class. Conversely, what should facilitators of any kind of group do when they see that a crucial insight is not emerging?

I have designed my IAF 2000 workshop so that the participants—including myself—can learn from each other's experiences and insights regarding the tension between facilitating and teaching (broadly construed), and the difficulties alternating between the two roles. The workshop consists of a series of activities for group interaction and intrapersonal reflection that should bring the experience and insight of teacher-facilitators to the surface. (A secondary aim of the workshop is that participants in their own work will explore further the interaction and reflection activities used during the workshop that were new to them.)

There are two phases to the workshop. The first phase is a case in which I alternate between teacher and facilitator. As teacher I present a mini-lecture on the topic of **population and environment**. This is a topic of general interest selected because I can, in a short time using slides and audience participation, introduce some non-standard perspectives about the role of scientific knowledge in shaping what counts as an environmental problem and for whom it is a problem (Taylor 1999). Then as facilitator I will lead a **focused conversation** (Stanfield 1997). This is designed so participants learn what other participants have observed and experienced

regarding the topic of **population and environment** and move from separate impressions to a dialogue on implications of the lecture.

The second phase moves the workshop from presentation of a case of alternating between teacher and facilitator to eliciting participants' insights on that issue. To effect a clear transition between the two phases, I will lead participants in ten minutes **guided freewriting** (Elbow 1981). Each participant will start writing with the unfinished sentence: "In this case it wasn't I who tried to shift between teaching and facilitating, but the thoughts/ feelings/ experiences that come to mind about trying to do this in my own work include..." The freewriting should expose thoughts about the topic that had been below the surface of their attention.

Primed by the freewriting, participants will then complete a questionnaire on a) the essence of their own approach to the tensions between facilitating and teaching, plus contextual information (see b-f below). This questionnaire is based on the "Sense-Making" approach to information seeking and use developed by Brenda Dervin, in the Department of Communication at Ohio State (Derwin 1999). One finding from Sense-Making research is that people make much better sense of seminar presentations and other scholarly contributions when these are accompanied by contextual information along the following lines:

- b) The reason(s) I took this road is (are)...
- c) The best of what I have achieved is...
- d) What has been particularly helpful to me in this endeavor has been...
- e) What has hindered me, what I have struggled with has been...
- f) What would help me now is...

Volunteers will then be invited to speak for two minutes, presenting one or two highlights from their responses and any additions they make while listening to the speakers who go before them.



Finally, as a "closing circle" and a workshop evaluation, every participant in the workshop will be asked to state one thing from the workshop that they plan to explore further in their own work, and one thing that could be developed further or done differently in a future workshop on this issue. A summary of the closing circle responses and of the questionnaires will be sent by email to all participants, to digest and make use of in their own work.

Facilitation Philosophy

The different interaction and reflection activities in the workshop share the same basic premises I see in the various workshop processes developed by the Institute of Cultural Affairs. They are intended to keep participants listening actively to each other, to foster mutual respect and elicit more insight. What comes out of a well facilitated group process is very likely to be larger and more durable than what any one person came in with; the more so, the more voices that are brought out by the process. Notwithstanding any initial impressions to the contrary, everyone has insight and everyone's insight is needed for the wisest result. Moreover, there is insight in every response. When a person is heard, they can better hear others which disturbs decisions made in advance about what the other people are like, what they are and are not capable of. And they can better "hear" themselves—each of us knows more than we are, at first, prepared or able to acknowledge.

Personal Contextualization

A little personal contextualization should help readers appreciate the motivation for this workshop and the activities employed. I have been a college teacher of critical thinking about science and society since 1986. Although I have let myself be stretched into arenas beyond science, the central goal of my teaching and writing is to show that placing developments in science and technology in their social context can enliven and enrich science education, science popularization, and citizen activism. Since about 1994 I have made time to learn from others

about writing through the curriculum, designing opportunities for co-operative, experiential, and project-based learning, and fostering students' different learning preferences (Taylor 1997). In 1997-98 I participated in three ICA facilitation training workshops in Toronto. In 1998 I took up a position in a College of Education. Increasingly, I find myself using ICA facilitation tools in my teaching and training others to use them in their own teaching and other professional work. Feedback from the ICA Canada listserv (enrol c/o melich@fhs.csu.mcmaster.ca) has been invaluable in this endeavor and, in order to continue to learn from more experienced facilitators, I decided to attend IAF 2000.

References

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