

The Art of Facilitation

By
Kip Flock
Revised, 2006

Facilitation, as an art, is at one and the same time freeing and terrifying. Facilitation has replaced teaching as the primary concept in student- instructor interaction. The movement from paternalistic classroom instruction to learner directed activities removes the inhuman expectation that the teacher has to make something out of the student, that the teacher must carry the burden of student achievement, that the trainer has to force the class “to get it”, that the educator’s self esteem is attached to student performance, and that the instructor must anticipate all classroom pitfalls with expert responses of seamless ease. Yes, facilitation is quite freeing as I take a deep breath of relief. Yet I cringe, poised for self critical condemnation. Aren’t adults, especially teachers, supposed to know what they are doing? Suppose someone sees me make a mistake, or hesitate, or reveal that I don’t know all the answers? God forbid that a student might notice. How can I give up the ideal of being an expert and give up, forever, the fantasy that someday I will no longer live in doubt, confusion, ambiguity, discomfort, and shame? And what about my own ultimate salvation? Yea, maybe I can live with not knowing exactly what I’m doing with students but isn’t someone going to tell me what the truth is? Do I have to also give up hope that someone will save me and tell me what to do, to be good, to be acceptable, to be happy and perfect? This paper is an effort to accept the full implications of facilitation, “a grieving for lost certainties” and “a gloriously messy pursuit in which surprise, shock and risk are endemic” (Brookfield, 1990, p. 46 and p. 1).

Carl Rogers articulates that only being in the process of acquiring knowledge can bring security- that the facilitation of such learning is the aim of education (Rogers, 1969, pp. 104-106). This paper will paint the picture of facilitation as the major ingredient for helping learners acquire the only realistic interpretation of security- the ability to adapt and maintain flexibility in the shifting sands of our reality. In fact the only security for facilitators of learning is the fact that no educational experience will be the same. As Heraclitus once said “upon those who step into the same rivers flow other and yet other waters” (Robinson, 1968, p. 91).

I find it fascinating that this pre- socratic thinker is so relevant to contemporary thought in education, perhaps even more so than ever. To facilitate effectively is to embrace the “flux” of life in the classroom, “expect the unexpected” and celebrate learner creativity in the spirit that “ all things come into being “through opposition” (Ibid pp. 89-95). Good facilitation invites opposition to the facilitator and the institutions that sponsor teaching. I have a great deal of fear in this awareness. Novelty always threatens the prevailing social norms and critical thinking emerges though the fires of instructor- learner discourse. Without question my own most difficult challenge as a facilitator is to allow classroom groups to be in their own reality and give up the control that perfectionism promises, but can never deliver.

Rogers states that a primary factor in successful teaching is the unconditional valuing of students “worth” (Rogers, 1969, p. 247). I’ve carried the belief that teaching means giving students advice on “right” behaviors. Shouldn’t the goal of educators be then the imparting of “correctness”? I’m coming to realize that even in such deterministic views as social learning theory the learner’s commitment to educational endeavors carries weight in programming outcomes. Albert Bandura concludes that the cultivation of student awareness is a powerful facilitative factor. In regards to symbolic control of behavioral changes, he states in Principles of Behavior Modification:

“ In studies of both instrumental and classical condition, persons who discern the contingencies governing the administration of rewards and punishments typically display significant increments in learning or

performance, where as unaware subjects generally show few or no conditioning effects” (Bandura, 1969, p. 622)

This is an astonishing position in comparison to Skinner’s arrogance in reference to the teachers’ “more than human” stature in his estimation (Skinner, 1968, p. 260 in Knowles, 1990, p. 126) Bandura’s positions asserts the importance of learner consciousness in planning for attitudinal change in students. Facilitation then originates with clear instructor-learner contracts. In my own evolution the use of social learning strategy in facilitation is far more acceptable within the learner centered context. Certainly, Roger’s sentiments are at least compatible with Bandura’s style.

It seems also that Roger’s “valuing process” is compatible with Jerome Bruner’s view that facilitators need to build on learner’s faculty for filling in cognitive gaps and going beyond the information given- that training people to be good guessers increases the utility of learning activities, so that “other things can be solved with no further learning required” (Bruner, 1973, p. 237). This outcome of the transferability of learning would certainly increase the facilitator’s effectiveness in achieving the self enhancement of the learner (Rogers, 1969, p. 251).

N.L. Gage sees teaching as the effort on the part of one person to facilitate the learning of another through trusting one’s inner senses, imagery, spontaneity of expression, and an ability to improvise. Here again the self- enhancement of the learner is paramount. The cues received from learners are the basis for facilitator responsiveness, “creating excitement and tension”, presenting information appealing to the various senses. This highlights for me the revolutionary conclusion that the students are fundamental to classroom activities, far more so than the teacher’s planned notes and designs. This includes subjects to be presented and pacing of intend activities. I can see why great facilitators are difficult to find in an obedient bound culture like ours and how difficult it will be for me to observe learners without obsessing on how they might be observing me (Gage, 1978, pp. 14-16)

According to Bruner, the traditional classroom was concerned with student acquisition of standard knowledge and extinction of socially unacceptable behavior. Facilitation of learner emergence into critical self reflection demands a change in tactics from the previous patriarchal models. “Laying the word” on students only sets up resistance in adults and stifles what Brookfield calls “emancipatory learning”. Facilitation is vital in the contemporary classroom as a catalyst for learner freedom- the freedom from personal, institutional, and other contextual sanctions that prohibit the imagination of new choices and independent self-direction (Brookfield, 1987, p. 12).

As an outcome of facilitation, critical thinking has several components, being: positive and productive, a process rather than an objective, contextual in culture, triggered by positive or negative occasions, emotional as well as rational (Ibid, p. 5). The role of helpers in learning is to support these natural processes in the group setting of a classroom. Facilitation incorporates both individual and group strategies for the acquisition of new information, the manipulation of knowledge to accommodate new tasks, and the evaluation of resulting changes in meeting the demands of the tasks (Bruner, 1973, p. 421). These critical functions of learning are the fruits of critical thinking. “Critical helpers try to awaken, prompt, nurture, and encourage this process without making people feel threatened or patronized.” Facilitation moves the learner past their assumptions to an awareness of “authentic voices”- that is their calling in life, what energizes them, their fears and confusion, their deepest sense of their essential selves (Brookfield, 1987, pp. 11, 34). In the gut level this sort of thinking is

both painful and rapturous in nature. As a learner myself, I both dread and yearn for the experience of self reflection. As a facilitator I have to know that to take learners to this place I must be willing to go there with them- to let the so called ivory tower of the aloof educator crumble for good.

I'm concerned about recognizing "teachable moments", (Brookfield, 1987, p. 10) those opportune times when learners are poised to enter what I've heard describes as the "dark night of the soul". This is the place in experience where detachment from archaic beliefs results in discomfort yet offers the reward of self-fulfillment. Some teachable moments come through conflict. My primary role in my family of origin was peacemaker, a survival mode that distorts perception, such that conflict is ignored or minimized. I need to expect that high emotion can flare in classroom discussion. I need to help the group contain their feelings as new images emerge from the heat of dialogue. "Dialectical thinking" can be highly emotive- including shock, fear, anger, joy, sadness and shame (Ibid. p. 29). I need to stay committed to containment of oppositional ideas and model standing up under the pushes and pulls of feelings during facilitation. This sort of "understanding" models appropriate expression of affect and not disassociation.

Good facilitators model going through their own transformation as a way of helping learners to find their own courage to take the risk of challenging implicit personal knowledge of self evident truths, both psychological and cultural (Brookfield, 1990, p. 113). Also referred to as "premature ultimates", learners carry with them beliefs that are mistaken for reality- fantasies that are taken as "givens" (Brookfield, 1990, p. 133 and 1987, pp. 44-47). One of mine is "peaceful men don't allow conflict". Another one is "Men don't show emotion or vulnerability". For me, the first is psychological and the second is a cultural assumption. All learners commit the "fallacy of misplaces concreteness" that is, assuming that their ideas are actual fact (Whitehead, 1925). Part of the great art of facilitation is helping others to find out that their assumptions are not facts, but rather beliefs among many other beliefs, that can be chosen consciously.

The outcome of such inner grappling is such that the threat of losing one's self is now seen as a challenge of context of our beliefs- that is, the experience of psycho- cultural death results in what Bruner refers to as "meaning maker". The metaphor of the serpent shedding dead skin to grow and accommodate new living tissue comes to mind. Facilitation of "meaning making" involves helping learners to see: that meaning is relative to perspective (i.e., peach comes out of boundary setting); personal and cultural evolution causes internalization of mental states that effect later ones; reality is constructed, not found, out of traditions and norms; groups permit us to negotiate a language of description for those unconscious "givens" underpinning our experience; communities of mutual learners externalize "works" that project new identity as well as anchor a sense of continuity" (Bruner, 1996, pp.41, 13-22).

One skill that facilitates "meaning making" in a group is the ability to assert "here-and-now" interventions- enhancing member- to- member communication through linking one members interaction with another and making abstract norms of communication more specific. Thus, you will hear good facilitators ask learners to contact each other, recall what learners have said relevant to the "teachable moment", ask those that have been excluded if they want to speak, urge those speaking of outside issues to make content relevant to the immediate process in the class, and compel learners to take ownership of their judgments by claiming assumptions and feelings in the form of "I" statements (Roth and Stockton, 1996, pp.

102-103). Irvin Yalom emphasizes the importance of the here-and-now experience as he states.

“The effective use of the here-and-now is dualistic: the group lives in the here-and-now and it also doubles back on itself; it performs a self-reflective loop and examines the here and now behavior that has just occurred” (Yalom, 1931, p.136)

The ultimate facilitation is multi-leveled. It reflects the immediacy of interactive process as it compels learners to “think about thinking” (Bruner, 1996, p.15). It’s also interesting to me that the great masters do this so well that no one notices. I want to be able to model such excellence in the classroom. I have witnessed skills like this in group therapy meetings and I’m hoping that such experience will be transferable to the classroom. This particular aspect of facilitation is very exciting to me and has inspired me to seek out “training in training”. I remain curious about the integration of emotions and cognition in a teaching style. Rogers, Yalom, Brookfield, and many others speak of encounter groups, simulations and role plays (Brookfield, 1990, pp. 115-131 and Yalom, 1931, pp. 486-514). There seems to be extensive crossovers between education and group therapy strategies for developing critical thinking and self-actualization. I remember seeing an interesting term tossed about in several articles predicting the outcome of a great transformation in the therapy field called “edotherapy”. Maybe the dichotomy between content and process is shifting in the larger culture.

At any rate facilitation concerns group dynamics as well as individual dynamics. As N.L. Gage put it, “teachers need to promote and guide educational dialogues, or discussion in ways that liberate the imagination and engage the intellect of all participants” (Gage, 1972, p. 43). Some requirements of successful facilitation are: warmth, humor, questions that promote guided discovery, indirectness which promotes thought and undercuts dependency; the ability to organize group “learning structures” into sub tasks that build on each other in a logical progression toward the contracted educational goals; and enthusiasm for the highs and lows of teaching (Ibis, pp. 36-39). The indirectness of facilitation will give me some pause, as I’ve become habituated to summarizing for groups that I train (Brookfield, 1990, p. 105). I also realize that as an authority figure to learners I can easily shut down novel ideas by insinuating in summary that the right answer has been exposed and makes any further speculation useless. I’m aware of the strong belief that I’m not doing my job unless I summarize and get the point across. This belief though is also being challenged by the greater purpose of adult learning- critical thinking.

Another critical function, as referred to by Gage, is the art of asking questions to promote discussion in the classroom. Effective facilitators set-up questioning with rapport building skills, empathizing with learners by entering their cognitive and affective maps of the world (Brookfield, 1987, p. 10). Adequate questioning skills are dependent on Gage’s notion of “cognitive organization” capabilities. After raising the trust level with learners, facilitators

need to have a step by step vision of the outcome that questions are guiding learners towards (Brookfield, 1990, p. 16). Questioning in such a manner will present another great challenge for me. Another belief I've carried is that too many questions will bog us down and we won't get through all the material. From this belief, data dumping still seems more efficient in getting from A to Z.

Brown and Wragg illustrate some helpful strategies in organizing questions. They distinguish between managerial, information data and higher order questions- higher order indicating analysis, making generalizations or inference. The facilitation of critical thought includes use of conceptual, empirical, and valuing type questions in the following dimensions: narrow/broad, observation/recall/thought, confused/clear and encouraging/threatening. I admire the spirit of the last dimension where effective facilitators "turn perceived threat into an acceptable challenge" (Brown and Wragg, 1993, pp. 6-15). I'm also aware that higher order questions that are broad in dimension elicit greater numbers of responses in learners. I can see where skill in group process is important so that such questions don't bog the class down in the "random walk"- an endless pointless series of questions and responses. Some helpful questioning learning tactics include: structuring; pitching and putting; directing and distributing; pausing or pacing; prompting and probing; listening in and responding; and sequencing. The directing and distributing, as well as, listening and responding techniques are a relief to assimilate into my own style as a means of guarding against the bog down of the class. Sequencing gives clear questioning choices that are congruent in process with Gage's notion of learning structures in group classroom facilitation: extending and lifting; narrow to broad and recall to thought; broad to narrow; path of same type; backbone and relevant digressions and series leading back to the original position (Ibid, pp. 18-22).

Effective responding punctuates the importance of Bandura's point that behavioral changes are generated most effectively when "reinforcement is made immediately contingent on the behavior one wishes to foster". Facilitating makes use of the shaping principle in learning theory, or successive approximation in the use of the listening and responding tactic. (Bandura, 1969, pp. 231-232). Such facilitations as stated in terms of behavior modification terms also agrees with Bruner's position in that "the highest level of autonomy is achieved when behavior generates self evaluative and other self reinforcing consequences". In other words good facilitators put themselves out of a job as learners internalize self directed learning experiences.

Bruner's position seems congruent with these conclusions on the level of the collective with his notion of the "subcommittees of learners". Good facilitators, then, also know when to stop facilitating. When group members achieve their identities as life long learners the resulting self esteem gives rise to further formation of the self. Two qualities of such self esteem are agency- the ability to initiate learning projects on one's own and evaluations- the ability to "assess the efficiency in bring off hopes". When facilitators allow

the autonomy that “group works” encourage, they become less active, allowing learners to make the world personal- “to create a vision of the world in which psychologically they can envision a place for themselves” (Brunner, 1996, pp. 23-29).

Buford refers to this psychological and social capacity as genuineness.

“The individual who has achieved genuineness welcomes an event and a situation where everything depends on himself, unaided and inconsolable” (Buford, 1980, p. 591).

The facilitator, as a model, is a primary factor in learner realization of this achievement. Bandura and Brookfield talk extensively in different terms about the same thing. Change occurs more readily when students can emulate someone they can respect and look up to-someone who walks the walk instead of just talking the talk. The art of facilitation is at its best when presented in congruence by a master in “genuineness”- some one who does what they say what they feel what they think (Brookfield, 1990, pp. 197-209 and Bandura, `969, pp. 118 and 604). The artful facilitators embrace the expectation that they too will need to welcome such times when they must depend on themselves, unaided and unconsoled.

Bibliography

- Brown, George. Questioning, N.Y., Routledge, 1993.
- Brookfield, Stephen. Developing Critical Thinkers: Challenging Adults to Explore Alternative Ways of Thinking and Acting, San Francisco, Jossey- Bass, 1987.
- Brookfield, Stephen. The Skillful Teacher: On Technique, Trust, and Responsiveness in the Classroom, Jossey-Bass, 1990.
- Bruner, Jerome. Beyond the Information Given, Norton, 1973.
- Bruner, Jerome. The Culture of Education, Harvard University Press, 1996.
- Buford, Thomas O. Philosophy for Adults, University Press of America, 1980.
- Gage, N.L. The Scientific Basis of the Art of Teaching, Columbia University, Teachers College Press, 1978.
- Knowles, Malcome. The Adult Learner: A Neglected Species, Houston, Gulf Publishing, 1990.
- Robinson, John Mansley. An Introduction to Early Greek Philosophy, Boston, Houghton Mifflin Company, 1968.
- Rogers, Carl R. Freedom to Learn, Columbus, Ohio, Merrill, 1969.
- Toth, Paul L. and Stockton, Rex. "A Skill-Based Approach to Teaching Group Counseling Interventions." The Journal for Specialists in Group Work, Vol. 21, No. 2, May 1996, pp. 101- 109.
- Whitehead, A.N. Science and the Modern World, N.Y., The Free Press, 1925.
- Yalom, Irvin D. The Theory and Practice of Group Psychotherapy, N.Y., Basic Books Inc., 1985