

The Art of Facilitation

“Please remember it is what you are that heals, not what you know.”
(C.G. Jung)

Being the lead facilitator in much of the work that I am engaged in, it is generally – as lead facilitator – my responsibility to hold the threads of a process together: to design workshops; to introduce sessions; to change direction where necessary; to sum up sessions, to end off whole seminars, etc. Part of the process of facilitation is living into each process so that I am breathing inside the situation, feeling through what is needed and what is being asked of me through the situation. Over time, I have come to see that there are various levels at which facilitation can happen; I have come to understand that facilitation can be a very technical and mechanical process, and it can also be a far more profound experience – an art. In this paper I would like to explore the movement towards developing facilitation as an art.

At a more technical level, the focus is most strongly on the *design* of the process. One designs a process (obviously related to the desired end results) and facilitation then primarily consists of taking participants through the process design and receiving and noting the feedback that comes out of the process design from the participants. Facilitation in this instance is largely about appropriate design, where certain processes are designed with certain ends in mind, where the participants have the opportunity to go through this particular process. There is no attempt to mediate meaning, to respond to participants’ input, to try to understand input at a deeper level or even to make links between different responses from the participants. It is merely a process of gathering information, collating the data, as it were, receiving the input offered by the participants. I have often observed this kind of facilitation very often. At this level, obviously, the most important aspect is the design of the process, and asking of the right questions within the design itself, and the setting in place of the right processes in order to achieve the desired outcomes.

Another level of facilitation is where the facilitator takes a more active role in the process. Here s/he *responds* to the input of the participants, ties threads together, links their contributions with one another (and with theory), offers insights, shares perceptions and experiences, and helps, overall, to make some meaning of the process. At this particular level, process design is also very important, but what becomes equally important is what happens inside the process, and the kind of meaning that the facilitator can help to shape for (and with) the participants. It is in the meaning that is shared between facilitator and participants that strength lies, and the interaction between the two, where dialogue is set up.

At yet another level of facilitation, the design of the process – while obviously there – becomes less important. While this level embraces the previous two, it also goes a step further. At this level, the facilitator takes the process into a *conversation* where meaning is lifted onto another level for both facilitator and participants. It is at this level of facilitation that the *purpose* (or intention) of the process, expressed through the design, becomes one with the underlying intention of the group. This means that – as facilitator – we need to be able to read the underlying movement, intention, the will of the group; its narrative thread. And in this reading, we need to be able to shift the design, to adapt the process in order to ensure that the two intentions marry and become one. We need to be able to provide – through the

process itself – the opportunity for the group to become conscious of its own underlying intent, its sense of purpose, and (obviously over time – this is not a quick fix process by any means) to become aware of those aspects of its life, its reality, its context, that have become hindrances to the full expression of its being, to that which is as yet unborn, unexpressed.

Here the process takes on a meaning where those involved are almost stepping outside of the situation to have a look at it from the outside in, and then also from the inside out, so that understanding can be shaped by an inside-out, outside-in perspective. At this level there is a recognition that there is a stream of consciousness that underlies any (specific) process, and the task of the facilitator is to tap into that stream of consciousness, into the particular meaning that exists at an invisible level, and to help to make this conscious for and with the participants. It is really about working with the invisible dimension of organisation and/or process, and trying to make it visible - for ourselves, and for the clients with whom we are working.

In this way it becomes apparent that we, as facilitators, do not 'make development happen' (because it is already happening), but rather, through reading, following and responding to the flow are enabling the development process, with all its challenges, crises, obstacles and opportunities, more conscious. We are helping to co-create, to sculpt, to breathe the underlying intent into full expression. Our task, as facilitators, is therefore to listen at that deeper level, to hear the questions, the possibilities, the direction that is suggesting itself, and to help – through the process – to make that more conscious for all involved.

It also means that while there is the development of the organisation (OD), or group, there is also the development of each individual, and our challenge is to hold the tension between these two, the development of the individual, and the development of the group as a whole. In this sense it matters not whether the group with which we are working is one organisation or a group of individuals from a variety of contexts. The same 'tuning in' can enable us to respond to both individual and collective possibility and need; to tune into the underlying reality that brings this particular group of people together at this time for this purpose, and to help to make this conscious.

Clearly, this requires an extraordinary fine-tuning of ourselves as facilitators. If we accept that something is moving in a particular situation, and that our task is to 'read' it, to understand it, and to reflect it back to participants in a way that lifts their own understanding so that they can see it closely and at a distance, then we can truly see ourselves as instruments of something much greater than this moment or this group. We are working with *emergence* at every level: the emergence of the process in response to the invisible strands of possibility which we are reading in the group; the emergence of those very possibilities within the group and the individuals within it; the emergence of our own understanding; and the emergence of the process of becoming: of individual, group, process and facilitator. The sense of responsibility to be able to read a situation accurately, and to hold the process and the individuals and the group with a loving respect, is enormous. We may not cease from engaging in our own ongoing process of development in order to honour what we undertake as facilitators at this level.

It is what we really mean when we talk about *self-understanding*: facilitating self-understanding is creating spaces where meaning is lifted out of the immediate and

placed on a level where people can see it from a vantage point; where their reality starts to form a coherent picture, where metaphor illuminates current reality; where the whole is able to be seen, held and understood, and where this 'whole' begins to shimmer, to reverberate with a sense of vision and possibility. How do we create spaces where conversations can take place where people really hear one another, listen to the underlying currents, observe finely what is taking place, and build a shared understanding together?

At this level of facilitation, asking the right questions is very important, and process design is also important, but most important of all is the ability of the facilitator to deeply listen; to be able to lift out the meaning that is emerging, and to help make this conscious for all. Workshop design is the initial scaffolding, the framing for what happens inside the process itself. Ultimately it is the meaning that participants are able to make of their own situations which will be the spur to change - or not.