



EUROPEAN CENTRE FOR MODERN LANGUAGES

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Project C8 – GroupLead

Group facilitation in language teacher education

Report of Central Workshop 3/2006

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The report is accessible in English and in French on the ECML website: <http://www.ecml.at>

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I. Co-ordinator's report

The five-day workshop turned out to be an exciting journey into the depths of group facilitation in language teacher education. The main themes covered were the following:

- the benefits of learning in groups;
- the dynamics of a learning group;
- the qualities and skills of a facilitator;
- the importance of active listening;
- the intercultural dimension of groups;
- questions and questioning;
- the role of feedback;
- challenging group situations;
- awareness-raising activities.

I think the workshop was a real success in terms of achieving its intended aims. To begin with, there was definitely a gradual clarification of some of the main concepts and terms related to the topic. In addition, key principles were introduced in an experiential way, for example, the group arrived at the features of good questions by reflecting on a series of activities based on formulating and responding to questions.

We tried out and reflected on a range of facilitation techniques and strategies both in plenary, as well as in smaller groups. We also identified and worked on some of the sub-skills of leading groups such as *opening up a topic*, *probing contributions*, *personalising*, and *summarising*. It was established early on that listening is at the heart of being a facilitator, and the number of comments related to the importance of being a good listener in the post-workshop questionnaire show that participants have really taken this on board. In addition, there was growing awareness of the cultural aspects of group facilitation and we worked on some strategies for dealing with challenging group situations.

Although the main focus of the workshop was group facilitation in teacher education contexts, some parallels were drawn between *training rooms* and *classrooms*. For example, there seemed to have been agreement that for real facilitation to take place there needs to be a collaborative and democratic educational climate – regardless of the particular language, level, or context. Feedback was identified as one of the tools for creating such a climate, and we spent some time brainstorming ideas for different ways of giving and asking for feedback. The important role that feedback plays is also reflected in the returned post-feedback questionnaires.

Participants were very active and keen to share their own experiences and ideas related to the topic of the workshop. Group discussions were lively and very productive. There were also a number of short participant-led sessions focusing on areas such as different ways of asking for student/trainee feedback, ways of assessing group work, web-based learning, ways of increasing the effectiveness of in-service training, and co-operative learning.

We ended the five-day workshop with action planning both in terms of the way participants can take ideas forward in their own contexts, as well as the way they can contribute to the planned project publication. We agreed on a number of different types of possible contributions, and I list these below:

1. Bank of activities with participants' reflections / comments;
2. 'Jigsaw' type articles (participants write a short response to one or two focusing questions);
3. Key quotations on groups and facilitation with interpretive comments;
4. Extracts from observation diaries focusing on particular topics, e.g. questioning;
5. Glossary of key concepts and terms;
6. Metaphors capturing the educational climate needed for facilitation;
7. Transcripts of facilitation sessions with comments.

As a next step, participants will receive a reminder of how they can contribute to the planned tool-kit publication together with clear guidelines. The deadline for the final publication is June 2007.

II. Participants' voices

Listening to different voices and appreciating a variety of perspectives on any one issue is at the heart of learning in groups. My aim with this report is to capture what went on during the five days in a way that is in line with the nature of group learning. I will therefore let the participants tell the story of the workshop in their own words. The quotations which make up the main body of this report are taken from a questionnaire which I sent out to participants two weeks after the workshop. Here are the questions which provide the framework for the report:

1. Please say in your own words what *group facilitation* means to you.
2. Do you think it makes sense to use the word *facilitator*? If yes, why? ... If not, why not?
3. What is one thing that you learnt at the workshop that you can bring into your own teaching?
4. What do you find most challenging about group facilitation?
5. What do you think is the best way to become a better facilitator?
6. Is there anything which makes it difficult to put group facilitation into practice in your own context?

The combined voices of 14 participants will give an account of what group facilitation involves, how one can get better at it, and what challenges we might face when trying to put it into practice in our different contexts.

1. Please say in your own words what *group facilitation* means to you.

“It means helping the group find their way towards learning.” (Eleni, Greece)

“Etymologically in my language ‘*faciliter*’ means make things easier, free from difficulties or obstacles to help the group achieve its own objectives.” (Andrée, France)

“Group facilitation means enabling (making it possible for) and helping a group of people to function as a learning community. For me it is an essentially human process.” (Cheryl, UK)

“For me facilitation is the art of successful group management.” (Anna, Armenia)

“Ce sont des groupes dans lesquels le professeur a une attitude d’écoute active vers l’apprentissage de ses élèves en promouvant l’interrelation personnelle réglant les besoins qui apparaissent.” (Nuria, Andorra)

“Learning in groups in democratic ways, learning together from each other, encouraging contributions, using the potential of each member.” (Marijana, “the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia”)

2. Do you think it makes sense to use the word *facilitator*? If yes, why? ... If not, why not?

“Yes, why not? If we do not use this term and work on it, people involved in teacher training might never realise this role they have to play. They might keep on providing their groups with input and recipes and will not bother a) activating their already existing knowledge and experience, b) making use of the potentialities of groups with all these different backgrounds, and c) finding the best ways for learning.” (Eleni, Greece)

“Yes and no. ... Yes, because a special set of skills is being emphasized. No, because it sounds like an ‘inflation’ of words – an attempt at glorifying the word teacher, and making that somewhat mundane word gain a more elevated meaning.” (Eva, Iceland)

“Yes, I do, definitely. I do agree with the underpinning educational philosophy totally. Introducing teacher trainees to this new technical term with its specific meaning is easier (subconsciously) than trying to change traditional teaching approaches. So it becomes a natural part of educating and training teachers of ‘new generation’.” (Gabriela, Slovakia)

“Yes, I believe it makes sense. ‘Group facilitation’ puts an emphasis on the importance of understanding group dynamics in order to create an environment where productive co-operation can be achieved.” (Laura, Ireland)

“Yes, if it works in one’s own language. In Hungarian this term sounds alien. It is used as a buzzword in business coaching, but it is unknown in general education.” (Andrea, Hungary)

“If we keep in mind that our role is to ease up / create the favourable conditions for learning, it does not matter very much if we call ourselves facilitators or plainly teachers. The quality matters more than the label.” (Adriana, Romania)

3. What is one thing that you learnt at the workshop that you can bring into your own practice?

“I’ve learnt about the importance of feedback and I’ve definitely started to use it in my contexts and I recommend it to other colleagues by explaining its importance and necessity.” (Marijana, “the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia”)

“Question techniques to drive points home more forcefully and in such a way as to show the group of students the logical steps by which the group may arrive at a conclusion.” (Eva, Iceland)

“One important thing I really learnt was the importance of listening to others – including yourself. This was reinforced I think by the layout of the room we were working in – a horseshoe formation – and the fact that if we had something to say, we had to speak into a microphone – only one voice at a time and everyone can hear that voice. ... I already tried this out with my students on my return from Graz – unfortunately we had to use ‘pretend’ mikes (rolled up card) but they were willing to ‘play the game’ – and I am convinced that this is an idea worth pursuing from the start of next year’s course.” (Cheryl, UK)

“Use group work and group facilitation not just intuitively, as I have been doing so far, but purposefully, professionally understanding the processes.” (Gabriela, Slovakia)

“One of the most important things the workshop helped me to clarify for myself is the functions of the facilitator. Putting two of them into my personal teaching practice, namely *structuring* (giving/asking for a summary) and *personalising* gave very good and unexpectedly quick results.” (Anna, Armenia)

“I think I’m on my way to improving my classroom questions, for example, probing questions to encourage further thinking. I’m also trying to allow time for thinking and answering, allow my students’ answers to shape my own thinking.” (Ausra, Lithuania)

4. What do you find most challenging about group facilitation?

“With adults: breaking cognitive stereotypes and helping them rediscover themselves and the pleasure to learn. With teenagers: planting seeds of questioning (not doubt, that to me is kindred to confusion).” (Adriana, Romania)

“It is always challenging to make students who are either shy, lazy or reluctant to do so participate. It is very difficult to find the right time and the right words to appeal to them.” (Andrea, Germany)

“Creating a climate where even the most reticent and shy participants can feel at ease. The biggest challenge I find is sometimes trying to reach a balance between active participation by all involved and respect for those who feel less inclined to speak out in public.” (Laura, Ireland)

“To disentangle the knots in a group and establish relationships within the group that would take into account: processes (agenda, problem-solving processes, information sharing processes, and ongoing assessment.), roles (decision making, behavioural), and goals (long term, short term, here and now).” (Andrée, France)

“Having an overview of aims and means. Monitoring progress and simultaneously providing feedback and stimuli.” (Eva, Iceland)

“‘Stepping outside’ of the teaching and learning interaction and taking responsibility for group facilitation – it’s a bit like chairing a meeting, where it is very tempting to get involved in the discussion at the expense of your chairing role – learning to balance your roles as teacher and group facilitator is for me the most challenging.” (Cheryl, UK)

“Dealing with conflicts, assessment of students working in a group, feeling the pulse of the group.” (Anna, Armenia)

5. What do you think is the best way to become a better facilitator?

“To challenge one’s own cognitive stereotypes and learn...learn.” (Adriana, Romania)

“Reflect upon my teaching/training approach, study the current views on how adults learn and find ways to show trainees the way.” (Eleni, Greece)

“To concentrate on processes.” (Andrée, France)

“Asking for feedback and evaluating the outcomes of group work.” (Eva, Iceland)

“I guess different things work for different people – personally, I think the best way will be for me to ‘just do it’ and then use tools like video or feedback from others to help me reflect and learn from the experience – over time, I imagine it will be helpful to work alongside a more experienced facilitator.” (Cheryl, UK)

“L’expérience et avoir une attitude ouverte et innovatrice dans l’espace classe dans le but d’appliquer de nouvelles méthodes qui favorisent l’apprentissage des élèves de forme participative et coopérative.” (Nuria, Andorra)

“If you reflect on your own work, your successes, problems and difficulties and share your experiences with colleagues. Something we certainly did during the workshop.” (Andrea, Germany)

“Study more about all the skills, functions of the facilitator and consciously develop the needed skills, strategies, reflect on the process, be sensitive to subconscious feedback and purposefully ask for feedback, which must be a small ‘stepping stone’ to the further development. But the very first thing is to believe in it, the endeavour to become a ‘true’ facilitator.” (Gabriela, Slovakia)

6. Is there anything which makes it difficult to put group facilitation into practice in your own context?

“The belief that experts know all. Trainees are not trained to be facilitated and trainers adopt gladly the ex-cathedra training approach.” (Eleni, Greece)

“My context!” (Andrée, France)

“The constraints of time and pressure to fit in with the same content as my colleagues in other subject areas.” (Cheryl, UK)

“The process of facilitation should start as early as the lower classes of primary school. If our primary and secondary school children were prepared in that new way now, our work would be much easier in the future. Thus, I can understand now how dissemination of the ideas developed during the workshop is important. But still, there is a question – How to get more support for facilitation of GroupLead at the ministry of education and other institutions?” (Anna, Czech Republic)

“First, the fact that the term ‘facilitation’ is almost unknown in Hungary and it is not used in professional practice makes it very difficult to introduce the concept. It should first be ‘Hunglised’ i.e. ‘domesticated’.” (Andrea, Hungary)

“Students are not used to this teaching strategy so it takes time and a lot of energy and enthusiasm to ‘infect’ them. Once they have switched to this way of working, it is great, effective, challenging... However, a term lasts only three months at my university, which is just the time they start to appreciate it and we could benefit from it. Unfortunately the term is over and again new students come who are again not used to it ... It is really very tiring work. It would be great if more and more colleagues worked like this. Hopefully the time comes soon.” (Gabriela, Slovakia)

Appendix: Timetable

	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	SATURDAY
09.00 – 10.30	30 min – Welcome, ECML 09.30 – 10.30 Ice-breaker Workshop overview Professional pathways (M, Meg, R) P's professional pathways Participant expectations (Margit)	Inventory of group learning activities 1 Active listening (Rod)	Facilitation: qualities & skills 3 Feedback (Rod)	Micro facilitation 1	Our contexts: participant-led presentations
10.30 – 11.00	<i>Coffee break</i>	<i>Coffee break</i>	<i>Coffee break</i>	<i>Coffee break</i>	<i>Coffee break</i>
11.00 – 12.30	Why groups? Why facilitation? (Rod)	Inventory of group learning activities 2 Group discussions Types of talk Language of discussions (Margit)	Cultural aspects of groups and facilitation (Meg) Setting up micro facilitation	Micro Facilitation 2	Our contexts: participant-led discussions Reviewing the week
12.30 – 14.00	<i>Lunch break</i>	<i>Lunch break</i>	<i>Lunch break</i>	<i>Lunch break</i>	<i>Lunch break</i>
14.00 – 15.30	<i>Dynamics of a learning group 1</i> Types of groups / Life of groups Glossary (Meg)	Facilitation: qualities and skills 1 Leadership styles Roles, functions, moves (Margit)	FREE AFTERNOON	Facilitation: dealing with difficult situations (Meg)	Final reflections Feedback & Evaluation Roundup
15.30 – 16.00	<i>Coffee break</i>	<i>Coffee break</i>	<i>Coffee break</i>	<i>Coffee break</i>	<i>Coffee break</i>
16.00 – 17.30	Dynamics of a learning group 2 Affective factors Group energy (Margit) Review and feedback ®	Facilitation: qualities & skills 2 Questions and questioning Language and body language (Rod) Review & Feedback (Meg)	FREE AFTERNOON	Getting the most out of group learning: awareness raising activities (Margit)	
Evening		Multi-cultural evening (Meg)		Dinner together	