

Practitioner perspectives on aspects of facilitation

(contributed by Margit Szesztay)

This section will provide a rich picture of what facilitation means to teachers and trainers working in various contexts in Europe. The quotations have been put together based on a questionnaire survey which was sent out to the participants of the ECML workshop on Group Facilitation in May 2006.

There are a number of different ways in which you can use this material:

For your own reflection

Read and respond to each of the following questions below. Then compare your responses to that of the other teachers and teacher trainers who responded to the survey.

As a group activity during a training workshop

Ask group members to respond to one of the questions below. Then ask them to read or listen to the relevant survey responses. I usually put the responses on slips of paper and ask group members to read them out one at a time. This way we can actually listen to the various teacher voices. The richness of perspectives usually triggers an interesting discussion.

Survey questions related to facilitation:

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 do you find most challenging about group facilitation?
4. What do you think is the best way to become a better facilitator?
5. Is there anything which makes it difficult to put group facilitation into practice in your own context?

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)

"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, FYRM)

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 cooperation 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 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 participate who are either shy, lazy or reluctant to do so. 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)

4. 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)

"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)

5. 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 'Hunglized' ie. '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)