

# FACILITATION

## A Tool for Evoking and Creating Wisdom

Jo Nelson

### Facilitating Diversity

Several years ago, I was facilitating a workshop at a conference of multi-cultural organizations in Ontario, to demonstrate some practical tools of facilitation. I had made a point of sharing my “working assumptions” for facilitating groups, which include “Everyone has wisdom” and “We need everyone’s wisdom for the wisest result”. About 20 adults, representing a good cross-section of the world, were actively participating in envisioning what they wanted our multicultural society to look like, brainstorming and sharing their ideas on cards on the wall. My youngest son, then about 7 years old, had accompanied me as it was a Saturday and I hadn’t been able to find child care. He was quietly playing with his Legos in the back corner. Suddenly one of the participants said, pointing at my son, “What does he think? After all, it’s the next generation who will benefit and continue this!”.

I called out, “Tim, what do you want our multicultural society to look like in 5 years?” He thought for a moment, then said, “can I have three colours of markers?” I said, “Sure” and handed them to him. He took a card and drew 3 stick figures of different colours dancing together.

The card went up on the wall and clustered with all the cards that said that we would be working and playing together in our multicultural society.

We were all astounded that a child’s spontaneous non-verbal contribution could add richness to the product of the adults, although in retrospect, we shouldn’t have been surprised.

### What is Facilitation?

The word facilitation is used to mean many different things. Its roots are in the Latin “facil”, to make easy. A shoehorn that eases a heel into a shoe “facilitates” putting on your shoe.

There are two common meanings of the term “facilitation” as a way of working with groups. On one hand, facilitation is seen as a way of guiding group activity so that **active learning** takes place, based on the knowledge and understanding that individuals bring to the training. On the other hand, process facilitation **draws out a group’s already existing wisdom** to solve a problem or create a solution that the group needs.

## Facilitating Learning

In facilitating learning, the trainer has content objectives that s/he wants the group to know by the end of the session, and/or behaviour they wish the participants to change. But the trainer starts with an assumption that s/he is not the only expert in the room. Participants have ideas and knowledge that are a starting point to build on. The trainer may guide the group to reflect on past experiences and draw out insight, through the use of carefully constructed questions that are both respectful and take people beyond their previous thinking. Occasionally a talk, a video, or even a story may be the starting point. With experiential learning, the trainer provides an experience for the group first, then guides the reflection on that experience. That experience may be an exercise or activity the group does together.

In such an approach to education, the job of the teacher may become easier and harder at the same time. In many ways, guiding the students to build their own knowledge through reflection relieves the teacher of the burden of knowing all the answers. However, it also removes the “cookbook” approach of teaching, where there is simply data to be downloaded from the text and the teacher into the student. Instead, the teacher becomes a catalyst to a three-part dialogue (or triologue) process between the information, the student, and the teacher. When students and the teacher reflect together, everyone learns.<sup>1</sup>

Although this kind of facilitated learning is often referred to as using “adult learning principles”, my experience is that they are true for all ages, and provide for learning that translates into real-life behaviour and choices.

Wayne Nelson summarized some of these learning principles in this way<sup>2</sup>:

People participate at their best when:

### **They are comfortable**

- An attractive, comfortable atmosphere invites participation.
- Emotional and social comfort help people participate.
- Modes of involvement that match people’s unique social style and learning styles, enable them to engage with ease.
- When people are able to express their perceptions, feelings and thoughts freely, they are more likely to become involved.
- Acknowledging, receiving and affirming people’s ideas allows them to share their deeper thoughts and feelings.
- When people are emotionally, intellectually and spiritually stimulated, they participate more readily.

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<sup>1</sup> Nelson, Jo, *The Art of Focused Conversation for Schools: Over 100 Ways to Guide Clear Thinking and Promote Learning*, Canadian Institute of Cultural Affairs and New Society Publishers, 2001

<sup>2</sup> Nelson, Wayne, *Meetings that Work Training Manual*, Canadian Institute of Cultural Affairs, 2000

**Things make sense to them.**

- When the topic under consideration and the process builds on their own knowledge and experience, people can easily join the discussion.
- Understanding the stages of the planned group process gives people a way to see how their contributions fit in a larger picture.
- When people understand and are aligned with the purpose of the meeting, they can see value in contributing.
- Situations and processes that reflect people's principles, values and ethics provide people with freedom to think widely.
- When the connections between people's real, personal experience and the questions being raised are clear, participation is more likely to be grounded in reality

**They believe they can make a difference.**

- Topics related directly to people's concerns, interests and hopes for the future stimulate their engagement.
- If the results will make a positive impact on their own lives, people are likely to participate positively.
- People who believe that their contribution to the discussions will make a positive difference in their situation and in lives of others participate with creativity.
- When people are able to use their knowledge and experience to create new meaning, they participate with creativity and passion.
- When people know they will be involved in implementing the plans and decisions they make, they participate with commitment.

In my practice, I find that the core skill that makes facilitated learning powerful is the capacity to guide the reflective thinking process that integrates people's experience with their real lives. A very helpful process starts with questions that ask people to recall their observations of their experience, then questions that get out their immediate reactions, then questions that probe for meaning, significance, learnings and relevance, and finally questions that elicit decision and action. At each stage, the facilitator listens respectfully and actively to the responses.

The Institute of Cultural Affairs, a global NGO, has been developing and using this process, which it calls "the Focused Conversation Method", for nearly 50 years with communities, education groups, and organizations.

One summer nearly 30 years ago, I was teaching a pre-school group at a summer camp. I had the four-year-olds recite the familiar nursery rhyme, "Little Miss Muffet". Then we had a brief conversation on the rhyme, roughly as follows:

**Objective Questions**

"What words don't you understand?" (tuffet, curds and whey, which I explained)

"Who were the characters?" (Little Miss Muffet, the spider)

"What happened first? Then...Then...?"

"What did Miss Muffet do when she was frightened?"

## **Reflective Questions**

“Where have you experienced something like this?” (One child said that his mother made him eat cottage cheese, and he hated it. Several children had stories of scary surprises, and their reactions.)

## **Interpretive Questions**

Then I asked, “What is this story all about?”  
One little girl thought for a second, then her eyes lit up. “This is about ... when you get scared, you can decide if you’re going to run away, or not!”

## **Decisional Questions**

She finished up with “Next time I will decide by myself what to do!”

I was astounded. This tiny child had seen far below the surface of this rhyme to a meaning that had relevance to her own life. Her capacity to abstract meaning, or to access a higher level of thinking, was empowered by the step-by-step thinking process of the Focused Conversation method.

This method facilitates learning, as it starts with the obvious and most easily accessed information and moves step by step through to higher levels of thinking, thus extending students’ capacity to think abstractly.<sup>3</sup>

The following conversation on an experiential learning exercise is taken from “The Art of Focused Conversation for Schools”. It could be adapted to follow any group experience, such as a ropes course, or a cultural encounter.

## **Reflecting on a Group Experience**

### **Situation**

A group of young people has participated in an unusual kinesthetic experience called “The Dance of Peace.” Some were reluctant participants; others were deeply moved. After lunch, the trainer is leading the group in a debriefing of their experience.

### **Rational Aim**

- To clarify what we did.
- To discover common motifs and themes.
- To identify the cultural origins of dance patterns.

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<sup>3</sup> Nelson, Jo, *The Art of Focused Conversation for Schools: Over 100 Ways to Guide Clear Thinking and Promote Learning*, Canadian Institute of Cultural Affairs and New Society Publishers, 2001

### **Experiential Aim**

To experience the wonder of each culture's contribution, and to feel the exhilaration of the dance.

### **Opening**

Think back to the dancing we did this morning.

### **Objective Questions**

- What movements do you remember?
- What did the movement look like?
- What dances did we do?
- What sounds do you recall? What instruments were used?

### **Reflective Questions**

- How did you feel as you were dancing?
- At what point did you feel unsure, confused, or embarrassed?
- At what point did you feel excited, deeply moved, or peaceful?
- When did you really "get into it"?
- Where have you seen or experienced something similar?
- What did this remind you of?

### **Interpretive Questions**

- What was going on in this dance?
- Why do you think the creator of these dances created them?
- What were they trying to express or communicate?
- What kind of experiences were they trying to provide for people? What can we learn from these dances?
- How were you changed by this experience?

### **Decisional Questions**

- To whom would you like to teach these dances?
- Where would you like to see them used again?
- Whom do you wish had been here this morning?

### **Closing**

When we started, I felt silly. After it was over, I thought, "This was fantastic."<sup>4</sup>

When the facilitator crafts the questions carefully in advance, imagining what kind of responses the group will give to them, this reflective process will work well for any age group. Respectful questioning and listening are skills that can be nurtured and practiced by professional and volunteers alike.

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<sup>4</sup> ibid

## **Group Process Facilitation**

Facilitation at its best is the art of drawing out ordinary, everyday people's wisdom. Then it helps a group acknowledge and understand differences and see the deeper patterns of similarity. That allows the group to create consensus and results that are wiser than any one person would have come up with alone.

This facilitation is "process" facilitation, which I believe is absolutely critical to building respectful understanding. In this kind of facilitation, the facilitator has no agenda except that which the group wants and needs. It is not training, though learning will also occur. The facilitator's role is to guide the way the group shares ideas, listens, and processes information, so that the group comes up with the decision or result that it needs. The best facilitator is nearly invisible – the group believes it has accomplished its objectives by itself, and surely it has. But the facilitator has brought the tools, process, and presence to inspire the best from the group. A group without an assigned facilitator may well be able to manage its dialogue to come up with a well-thought-through consensus. But not every group can do that, and I know of no group who can do that well all of the time.

I believe this kind of facilitation has its roots in traditional consensus creation that emerged from small groups of people in different cultures. Many discovered that if they sat around a fire, or in a circle, and created opportunities for everyone to speak and really listen, that they could make difficult decisions that everyone was committed to supporting. Some of us facilitate naturally, others of us yearn for it in difficult group sessions without knowing exactly what is missing.

In the last few hundred years, we have fallen into a pattern of seeing the world as dualistic: there is us and them, government and opposition, good and bad, right and wrong, black and white, "my way or the highway" etc. When we see the world that way, our pattern of responding leads to argument, and to either winning or losing. Defense or attack result, and we get locked into our own pre-conceived positions.

If we look at the world as a multi-faceted reality, like a diamond with many facets, we find ourselves looking to polish and illuminate many perspectives to find the wisest solution to a problem. The "what if we tried a third (or another) way of looking at this" question allows us to bypass argument about right and wrong positions. An even more radical way of processing differences looks for the synthesis of quite unique ideas to create a larger picture out of diverse pieces of the puzzle. Both of these ways of creating consensus contribute to real peace as they don't gloss over differences, but rather build on them as creative stepping stones to solutions and understanding.

The group process facilitator believes that the group has all the wisdom it needs to solve its own problems. It is important to have as many stakeholders represented as possible to make sure every angle of insight can contribute to the solution. Often this means examining all our categories of people who are "the enemy" or "can't participate" for one reason or another.

I recall a facilitated consultation nearly 30 years ago in an Egyptian village to plan its community development project. Men and women; non-literate village residents, highly educated urban Egyptians, and non-Arabic-speaking consultants from a range of different cultures sat down in the same room (well, tent) to pool their wisdom. Each of us had different ideas of what was possible or even necessary. Each of us had our reservations about what the others could contribute. All together we brainstormed our ideas, clustered them to see the patterns, and named what we had come up with. The villagers' passionate visions were augmented by "expert" ideas. The abstractions and overly technical visions of the "experts" were made realistic by the villagers' grounded ideas. The plan was "owned" by everyone present. Twenty years later, when I visited the project again, I could see how the village people and the outsiders had worked together to transform the community, and were still motivated and moving forward.

### **Preventing conflict**

Often I talk about facilitation as a relationship: "facilitation is to conflict resolution as health promotion is to medical healing". Facilitation often prevents conflict, as it can be an intervention before a conflict exists or becomes entrenched. It honours all the perspectives and all the people to come up with a satisfactory solution. In the same way, facilitation can be a tool for healing conflict that has already begun.

The culture of participation which facilitation supports has the capacity to transform how we treat each other, the feeling of having been heard and respected. One of the most often repeated comments I hear after a facilitated event is, "I thought I was the only one who had those ideas! I know now I'm not alone!"

Facilitating group participation also increases shared ownership and responsibility for decisions. If I participate in contributing to the naming of a problem and also to creating the solution to it, then I am already a part of the solution.

### **What competencies does a group process facilitator demonstrate?**

The International Association of Facilitators has been engaged over the last decade in research to develop a set of competencies for process facilitation. In 1996, Brian Stanfield and I pulled together the research to that point, and Brian wrote an article for ICA Canada, "The Magic of the Facilitator", summarizing the core competencies. Although the IAF has refined the competencies since to develop a measurable set of indicators that are used for its international certification program, the article provides a fine introduction to understanding the competencies of a facilitator. An abridged form of the article is attached, published with the author's consent.

## Conclusion

So whether you are building on the wisdom and experience of a group to extend their learning, or to create a product that they need, try spending most of the time asking the participants what they think. I have discovered a paradoxical truth recently: if you ask people for their wisdom and really listen, they think **you** are wise. And there's even an extension of that: if you ask people for their wisdom and really listen, you all **get** more wise.

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### **The Magic of the Facilitator<sup>5</sup>**

Brian Stanfield

Competence #1: On Top of the Methods

#### **The Facilitator is effective in using core methods**

The facilitator is competent in designing and leading larger or smaller group processes and events: a conversation or discussion, a meeting, a workshop, a design conference, an environmental review, a strategic planning session or a macro program of consultation. As a result, the facilitator is free to flex in the face of new emerging possibilities.

Competence # 2: Able to Deliver on the Deal

#### **The Facilitator carefully manages the client relationship and prepares thoroughly**

The facilitator has to be able to care in depth for the client organization.

Competence #3: Both Janitor and Metronome

#### **The Facilitator uses time and space intentionally**

It is not enough to merely select a good space for the group event. The facilitator has to know how to create the event environment. The facilitator also has to be the metronome for the group, sensing the rhythm that is most enlivening at a particular time of day; pacing the activities so as to capitalize on the "beat" of the group; apportioning available time both to get the job done and to reach timely closure.

Competence #4: The Evocateur

#### **The Facilitator is skillful in evoking participation and creativity**

More than a methodologist, the facilitator also has to be an evocateur, with an unshakable belief that the group itself has the wisdom and creativity needed to deal with the situation. What is involved here is the ability to create a climate of participation. The facilitator knows how to elicit the latent wisdom in the group by catalysing everyone's participation, and involving the whole group in taking responsibility for its own decisions.

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<sup>5</sup> Stanfield, Brian, The Magic of the Facilitator, Edges Magazine, Canadian Institute of Cultural Affairs, 1996

Competence #5: Affirmation on the Hoof

**The Facilitator is practiced in honouring the group and affirming its wisdom**

Appropriating a group's diversity as a gift is more than just a skill, and much more than what is involved in the facile "I'm-OK-you're-OK." In practice it entails the ability and readiness to listen carefully to participants' words, to accept silence with understanding, to maintain accepting eye contact with the speaker, and to note down the individual's insights verbatim. The other side of honouring a participant is the readiness to push occasional answers for clarity so that the participant's real insight is revealed.

Competence #6: Under the Neutral Flag

**The Facilitator is capable of maintaining objectivity**

A key role of the facilitator is to provide objectivity to the group process. The facilitator sets aside personal opinions about the data from the group, being careful not to react negatively to people's insights, and maintaining detachment from the group-generated data.

Competence #7: Antennae Up

**The Facilitator is skilled in reading the underlying dynamics in the group**

The facilitator is practiced in sensing dynamics in the group, interpreting the silence of the group, identifying individual "axes" and hidden agenda, and not only sensing the group's uncertainty at particular points but taking steps to clarify it. Deft at picking up non-verbal cues, the facilitator listens with a "third ear" to pick up the significance of what lies behind participants' words. On the more active side, the facilitator is facile in pushing negatively phrased data for its underlying insight and probing vague answers for their fuller meaning.

Competence #8: The Orchestrator

**The Facilitator orchestrates the event drama**

Paramount to engaging the group's commitment to the process is the development of audience rapport. The facilitator is inventive in shifting time and mood intentionally to get the job done, savvy in using personal illustrations to release the group, and sagacious in using humour catalytically. Along with these talents go the sensitivity to know when the group needs a break, when the pace needs changing, and when the group needs to struggle, if necessary, in order to reach the breakthrough point.

Competence #9: The Drano Function

**The Facilitator releases blocks to the process**

The facilitator has creative ways to release blocks to the process. This demands a light touch to gently discourage side conversations. It calls for shrewd tactics to discourage "speechifying" and argumentation, and demands tactful ways to discourage the dominance of particular individuals, to handle "difficult" people and to deal helpfully with conflict. In thorny situations, the facilitator is able to bring difficult decisions back to the group so that it can take responsibility for its own process.

Competence #10: Highwire Balancing Act

**The Facilitator is adroit in adapting to the changing situation**

Facilitation involves a balancing act on the highwire. Ancillary to all the skills so far described is the capacity of the facilitator to flex with the changing situation. The facilitator knows how to balance the process on the one hand and the results of the process on the other; to harmonize the needs of the participants at any one moment with the total demands of the task.

Competence #11: Big Shoulders

**The Facilitator assumes responsibility for the group journey**

The facilitator has the maturity to assume responsibility not only for the process, but also for the overall task, the participants and the outcome of the event. This assumes the willingness to take on a big load, to take responsibility for every single aspect of the program, to deal successfully with ambiguity, to use one's critical intelligence to make hard decisions and then to take the consequences of those decisions. This assumes a solid personal discipline and a strong spiritual base.

Competence #12: Hard Copy

**The Facilitator can produce powerful documentation**

Coming up with a finessed group product—a documentary record of the group's insights—is a bottom line of facilitation.

Competence #13: Group Role Model

**The Facilitator demonstrates professionalism, self-confidence and authenticity**

The development of a professional self-image, self-confidence, and an intentional style and dress is an important asset of the facilitator. But more important is the willingness to play the role of a model of authenticity for the group. Above all the facilitation practitioner takes care to walk the talk. While rejoicing in the successes of the group, the facilitator speaks only from experience, preferring to remain silent rather than give "good advice" that is not grounded in personal experience.

Competence #14: The Iron Pillar of Freedom

**The Facilitator maintains personal integrity**

Finally, the facilitator knows the secret of maintaining personal integrity; and has learned how to authentically process and relate to rejection, hostility and suspicion; how to let go of any personal pain arising from a program; and how to take care of personal renewal for the sake of the next client situation.

## Brief Bibliography:

Nelson, Jo, *The Art of Focused Conversation for Schools: Over 100 Ways to Guide Clear Thinking and Promote Learning*, Canadian Institute of Cultural Affairs and New Society Publishers, 2001

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Stanfield, Brian, *The Magic of the Facilitator*, Edges Magazine, Canadian Institute of Cultural Affairs, 1996

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For more information on the field of facilitation, try the International Association of Facilitators website [www.iaf-world.org](http://www.iaf-world.org) IAF has also created a draft ethics statement for facilitators.

For more information on the Canadian Institute of Cultural Affairs visit <http://icacan.ca> . For its partner organization, ICA Associates, Inc., visit <http://ica-associates.ca> .

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Ms. Nelson holds a B.A. degree in education and anthropology from the University of Iowa. Her professional background includes 35 years in facilitating large and small groups, and four years on the executive of the International Association of Facilitators (IAF). She holds the Certified Professional Facilitator (CPF) designation of the IAF and the Certified ToP Facilitator (CTF) designation from ICA. She is also the author of "The Art of Focused Conversation for Schools: Over 100 Ways to Guide Clear Thinking and Promote Learning".

This article was first written for *Interspectives, A Journal on Transcultural Education*, Volume 19 – 2002-2003, published by CISV, Children's International Summer Villages. Their website is <http://cisv.org> .