



Overview of Facilitation

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Facilitation is an essential ingredient in teaching/learning, and all faculty members can benefit immensely from improving their skills in this performance area. Facilitation can be used with students to help them grow as learners, with graduate students to help them grow as researchers, with committee members to promote team problem solving, and with professional organizations to create effective mission statements and to accomplish strategic objectives. Facilitation involves a mindset of helping others perform better by creating growth opportunities and by providing coaching that allows others to take on more ownership and control of their performance. A facilitated activity should be planned in advance, thoughtfully and efficiently set-up, and managed continuously with an appropriate level of intervention. The facilitator should also provide effective closure. This module shows that quality facilitation depends on understanding the Facilitation Methodology, attending to key principles, and cultivating specific facilitation skills.

Need for Facilitation

As outlined in *Introduction to Process Education*, economic and cultural changes in society have highlighted learning outcomes and institutionalization of effective processes in measuring academic performance (Huba & Freed, 2000). This has led to wide adoption of learner-centered teaching and responsibility-centered management (Boyer Commission, 1998). As such, many faculty members are now interested in how they can become less of a “sage on the stage” and more of a “guide on the side” (Barr & Tagg, 1995). This module introduces a framework for strengthening facilitation in a variety of higher education contexts. The first element is the Facilitation Methodology explored in detail in the module *Facilitation Methodology*. The second element is a set of key principles for enhancing learning skills in addition to producing learning. These principles shown in Table 1 are intended to provide guidance in developing a number of high-level assessment, affect management, and interpersonal skills that are critical in facilitation.

Table 1 Principles for Quality Facilitation

<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Do not make assumptions. 2. Shift ownership of the process to the participants. 3. Establish shared expectations. 4. Develop a strong, flexible facilitation plan. 5. Perform continuous real-time assessment. 6. Intervene on process, not content. 7. Shift role to consultant when the participants use the facilitator as an expert. 8. Bring closure to each activity. 9. Perform a summative assessment of the facilitation process. 10. Connect with each participant. 11. Make sure that every key finding, consensus, and valuable insight is documented. 12. Make the process rewarding and growth-oriented for the participants. 13. Do not compromise the means for the sake of the ends.
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Facilitation Principles

Effective facilitators are very disciplined in their role and fluent in their use of cooperative learning practices (Johnson, Johnson, & Smith, 1998). They are prepared to guide teaching/learning activities toward pre-determined learning outcomes, to monitor participants’ emotions during the process and provide needed support without accommodation, and to interrupt performance by asking questions that are intended to improve participant performance. Effective facilitators:

1. Do not make assumptions.

Whenever the facilitator is on a different page than the audience, the facilitator will quickly lose their attention and confidence. Therefore, ask questions frequently, do perception checks, pre-assess, and fill in missing gaps by assessing continuously. Inquire before intervening.

2. Shift ownership of the process to the participants.

The performance of a process and its outcomes must be valued by participants for optimal results. This requires full engagement and commitment of all parties involved, especially the facilitator.

3. Establish shared expectations.

The outcomes of any facilitated process must be defined clearly, connected to its goals, and agreed upon by the participants and facilitator. These outcomes should be specific, measurable, achievable, results-oriented, and time-bound.

4. Develop a strong, flexible facilitation plan.

Have an infrastructure and plan for each facilitation. This is enhanced by a set of resources/tools for making on-the-spot changes. Remember that improvisation is 90% preparation and practice—and only 10% inspiration.

5. Perform continuous real-time assessment.

Constantly determine and update individuals' needs. Determine which needs are being met and how to meet those that are not. Also, work to improve the dynamics governing the interactions of the participants (*Overview of Assessment*).

6. Intervene on process, not content.

Whenever an expert or outsider, acting as a facilitator introduces his or her expertise on content, it implicitly says that the participants' abilities are discounted; it reduces their ownership of the content/outcomes, and they become more passive, opening the door for the facilitator to do more. By focusing on the learning skills that underlie learning new content, facilitators affirm participant abilities and build greater capacity for future performance.

7. Shift role to consultant when the participants use the facilitator as an expert.

Whenever the participants need the facilitator's expertise as a resource, the facilitator can switch roles and answer questions freely. It is helpful to place restrictions on the number of questions or the time allocated to consulting. The key is to assume this role only when invited by the participants.

8. Bring closure to each activity.

At key milestones and at the completion of the process, summarize what has been accomplished and what still needs to be done. Strive to do this through horizontal communication between and among participants, rather than through a lecture by the facilitator. It may be necessary to rephrase and synergize participant discoveries, but do this by acknowledging participant contributions to your message.

9. Perform a summative assessment of the facilitation process.

At the end of a process (e.g., class, meeting, research project, semester, etc.), collect and analyze evidence about the quality of the entire process to bring closure to it. Many facilitators find it effective to keep a notebook in which they record strengths, areas for improvement, and insights gained from the activity (*SII Method for Assessment Reporting*).

10. Connect with each participant.

During the facilitation, make each participant aware that he or she is valued. This can be done directly or indirectly, with spoken words or with body language.

11. Make sure that every key finding, consensus, and valuable insight is documented.

It is the recorder's job to do this documentation while the teams are engaged in the activity. It is vitally important that someone be appointed to perform the recorder's role during the closure period. No matter how deep the insights are when expressed verbally, if they are not written down, they will be lost. It is effective to edit these findings and play them back to participants at the start of a future activity.

12. Make the process rewarding and growth-oriented for the participants.

Learning should be enjoyable, even fun, and the facilitator is responsible for keeping the participants challenged, not angry or disengaged. Growth requires a well-maintained balance between support and challenge.

13. Do not compromise the means for the sake of the ends.

The results should not be made more important than the people in the learning process. Do not be afraid to make adjustments if learning objectives are not possible with the participants' levels of preparation or personal development.

Facilitation Skills

While the principles outlined in the previous section explain the essence of quality facilitation and motivate the steps in the Facilitation Methodology, focusing on several of the following skills at a time is probably the best method for elevating facilitation capability.

Listening and rephrasing—the ability to understand from the perspective of others the meaning of what they are trying to say and being able to restate it in one's own words to make sure that there is shared understanding.

Setting criteria—the ability to identify areas of measure by which the quality of a product or performance can be assessed. A criterion often points to competency areas cited in program objectives, project plans, course syllabi, and accreditation documents.

Parallel processing—the ability to focus on more than one task at a time. An example of parallel processing is metacognition, where one monitors one's understanding of a process during its performance by conducting an internal conversation.

Identifying key issues—the ability to ask critical questions to identify important issues associated with a problem which should be considered during the problem-solving process.

Identifying assumptions—the ability to distinguish between the available information relevant to a problem and the assumptions needed in order to model and solve the problem. It is important to validate assumptions since altering them can lead to new and completely different solutions.

Making connections—the ability to make linkages, to provide structure to content, to reach conclusions that are not obvious, and to analyze and synthesize to find answers that are not directly available from sources.

Being open to feedback—the readiness to learn from and accept assessment of one's performance from both peers and activity participants.

Being open-minded—the ability to approach situations creatively; being inventive; remaining aware of all possibilities.

Risk-taking—the self-confidence to put oneself into challenging environments that require an ever-increasing level of performance and possibility of failure.

Managing frustration—the ability to handle the emotional consequences that accrue from not performing up to one's expectations and by trying to figure out how to improve the next performance.

Summarizing—the ability to present the substance of a proceeding in concise form without losing or changing its meaning.

Recognizing emotions—the ability to identify the correct emotion(s) being felt by oneself or another from verbal and non-verbal signals so that a growth-producing response can be made.

Examples of Facilitation

The following sections present examples of the many different situations in which facilitation is appropriate.

Classroom Facilitation

There are many facilitation opportunities available in education, ranging from one-on-one to large lecture classrooms. Traditionally, large classes utilize lecture

exclusively, often accompanied by small discussion sections or labs once a week. Collaborative problem-solving activities using classroom communication technologies, such as Classtalk, can promote active learning in large lecture classes and, if used appropriately, highlight the reasoning processes that students use to solve problems (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 2000). Classtalk allows student groups to enter answers on palm-held input devices which then display histograms of class responses. The goal is to stimulate class discussions in which students justify the procedures they used to arrive at their answers and listen critically to the arguments of others. It is possible to facilitate small group activities in large classes using creative seating arrangements (leaving every third row empty) to allow the facilitator to move freely about the lecture hall, monitoring the small groups.

The opposite extreme of large group facilitation is the facilitation of a small group, often as small as a single individual. In mentoring, the professional works intensively with one person while focusing on affect management and skill development. The facilitation of one-on-one learning challenges the person to achieve significant growth as a learner.

Facilitation is not restricted to a faculty-student model. Student peers can also serve in this role of facilitating learning. Note that this process is different from collaboration between peers, since the relationship involves an expert's trying to help a less experienced learner discover a significant concept, solve a problem, use a tool, etc.

A faculty member must not fall into the trap of thinking that facilitation is simply supervising or managing teams of students. As mentioned in the opening paragraph, quality facilitation produces a challenging learning environment in which performance is continually improved, learning skills are grown, and students work toward becoming self-growers. Facilitators must change their thinking so they do not revert to the old paradigm of teaching which is based on the assumption of John Locke that the untrained student mind is like a blank sheet of paper, a "tabula rasa," waiting for the instructor to write on it. Instead, they must adopt a new paradigm based on cooperative learning in which faculty guide and mentor students as they actively construct their own knowledge (Johnson et al., 1998).

Facilitating a Committee

The Facilitation Methodology is also helpful for facilitating committee meetings. To ensure a successful outcome, it is essential to do the following: identify what needs to be accomplished; choose a time and place; design an agenda;

decide what strategies will be used to handle each agenda item; send preliminary information to the participants and check that they have read it; get participant buy-in for the meeting structure and agenda; introduce each agenda item; encourage focused discussion; intervene to bring discussion back on track and to a conclusion; summarize the points of agreement and disagreement at the end of the time period; remind each person of his responsibility for the action item assigned him or her; ask the participants to identify strengths and areas for improvement of the meeting process; and set a time and place for the next meeting, if necessary.

The above description is an example of the broad application of the Facilitation Methodology to handle many situations where people purposefully interact. The following facilitation issues, except grading, also have wide application.

Issues Affecting Facilitation

There are a great number of issues facing facilitators, but the following five are probably the most universal and the most significant.

Buy-In

It is essential that all students in the class commit themselves fully to the class and the groups to which they are assigned. To accomplish this “buy-in,” the facilitator must continuously emphasize student learning as a primary goal, must create high expectations for the session, and must then uphold them through constructive interventions.

A Quality Learning Environment

Build mutual trust, share commitment, avoid judgmental statements, promote risk-taking, provide timely assessment, and document progress and growth.

Grading

Effective grading rewards and motivates students to devote themselves wholeheartedly to their learning growth. We all know that grades matter greatly to students. Grading affects how students study, what they focus on, how much time they spend, and how involved they become in the course. Thus, grading is a powerful part of the motivational structure of the course (Walvoord & Anderson, 1998).

Planning

Successful facilitation requires continuous planning of the course as a whole, including course assignments, class activities, and assessments (*Facilitation Methodology*).

Assessment

Successful facilitation requires continuous assessment and feedback using learning journals, mid-course assessment instruments, and daily reflectors’ reports (*Assessment Methodology*).

Concluding Thoughts

This module has introduced facilitation as a key process in Process Education. Effective use of this process in conjunction with a Process Education philosophy has motivated hundreds of classes of students to significantly improve their learning skills, perform quality assessment of their performance, and make progress toward attaining competencies expected by the modern workplace (SCANS, 1991).

These results need to be carefully documented and reported using pedagogy research methods. Faculty are challenged to constantly improve their facilitation processes.

References

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