



Sharing experiences of facilitation through writing

Part 2

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Without edge and stretch, what's the point of being a facilitator?

Steve Hearsom



Getting 'into the groove' of facilitation can be intoxicating and a breeze, for me at least. I have begun to notice that those moments of ease, when a group is on task and I am thinking "this is going well...this is flowing...", that is data that I might be colluding with the group and/or individual participants in shying away from the edge that is there to be explored, if the purpose of our work together is genuinely about some form of transformative learning.

Keywords

informed intuition, transformative facilitation, learning, edge, challenge, provocation, stretch, compressive intervention

Overcoming the shame of 'being seen'

My relationship with group work, and therefore facilitation, goes back to my first foray into facilitating cross-functional groups on an organisation-wide review of processes when I worked at The Guardian around twenty years ago. Subsequently I worked regularly on technology-driven change programmes gathering requirements and then ultimately moving more to explicit training or learning contracts. In the midst of my own development as a practitioner, whilst attending one of the group modules on my Masters, I had the experience of being taken to my own edge and being stretched to the point of snapping.

'Edge' and 'stretch'

When I talk about 'edge', I refer to what I imagine many might think of as 'learning edge', which can end up sounding like a platitude or facilitator jargon. The OED defines 'edge' as:

1. The outside limit of an object, area, or surface
2. The sharpened side of the blade of a cutting implement or weapon.

In the context of learning, in particular transformative learning which occurs not solely at a cognitive and intellectual level but more deeply, I mean 'edge' that is indeed at my limit (of understanding, competency, courage, comfort, physical or psychological 'safety' etc) and that has this sense of sharpness, an awareness that it can go deep, skilfully, and that may be painful even if needed and welcome.

'Stretch' may follow, but is not a prerequisite. I may have encountered my edge, but choose to step back from learning more, for a whole number of reasons. Stretch may occur without it being in an area that is at your edge, and it is when the two combine that practice really develops.

An example from my own life. I did the MSc in Change Agent Skills & Strategies at the University of Surrey (2005-2008). The programme no longer exists, which is worthy of a wholly different inquiry into how Universities and Management Education struggles with learning that offers edge and stretch at a human systems level. In a seminal moment, I had the epiphany that, despite calling myself, amongst other things, a 'facilitator', I realised that I found working with and in front of groups deeply distressing, exposing, scary and plain un-enjoyable. There I was, in front of the group, held by the skill of the facilitator, Simon Cavicchia (the embodiment of compassionately facilitating people to work at their edge), stripped emotionally naked, raw, exposed, utterly overwhelmed with the shame of 'being seen'. For me, with my story, that was terrifying.

On that edge, in that stretch, I had an experience of transformational learning. I teetered with two choices: to run, metaphorically and/or literally, or to dive headlong into the painful absurdity of how I had ended up as a facilitator who hated to facilitate. I chose the latter.

Fast forward from 2007, mix in five more years of therapy and the last four and a half years developing and deepening my practice at Roffey Park, and I show up as a different practitioner with a different experience of myself in group.

That's not the point, though. In a sense: big fat, hairy deal. So what? So what if I have learned about myself? So what if I have had my own rich experience deepening my practice (whatever that means – it seems like a euphemism for something, although I am never sure quite what. How deep do I need to go? Do I need a rope and a torch?).

Part of the shadow side of facilitation practice and Organisational Development more widely is that both can end up being self-referential, self-absorbed and more concerned with the practitioner's journey than in utility and relevance to clients. Yes, it is important that I increase my effectiveness as facilitator (or coach, or consultant etc.); it is vital, however, that I am clear enough on the balance between what I need and what is in service of others.

Facilitative edge

I have a couple of edges as a practitioner that I pay particular attention to at the moment, and these have been the main ones on and off for a few years. They are improvisation and challenge.

Improvisation

Every strength has a shadow when over-egged. I am extremely comfortable with working 'in the moment', and will happily respond to what is emerging in order to ensure that what the group/client needs to achieve/work on is attended to, even if that means tearing up a design/session plan and doing something totally different. Lean too far into my ease with improvisation, and chaos might ensue, or a shoddy learning experience. Thankfully I seem to tread the right side of that line most of the time, with the occasional kick up the arse administered by life.

Challenge

The other edge is around my experience of challenge, of what happens when it manifests as, say, conflict between others or between others and me (that's the son of an alcoholic in me and much of the material for therapy, in case you were wondering). In recent years, my ease with gristle, grit, aggression and anger has increased. Not only in others, but also in terms of awareness of my own and my willingness to express it/use it appropriately and/or as data.



“Working in/with conflict has felt at times like it might be toying with danger”

Nested in this developing comfort with what happens when differences are named and generate heat, I have noticed that the more I trust my instincts and couple that with critical reflection on what the data might be telling me, the greater the ease with which I am straight, direct and clean in offering observations. In turn, the feedback and observations from clients has been intriguing and useful. It has sparked the material for this piece of writing.

“How far should I go?”

Working with a group recently, I had a sense from a participant, in how they were framing their story, of someone who is hard on themselves. The programme is an Organisational Development Practitioner Programme that offers a Graduate Certificate, and is run for internal HR, L&D and OD people within a major

UK manufacturing business that has a globally recognized brand and presence. This person had not attended the first learning set (this was the second of a series of five, that forms part of the self-managed learning nature of the programme) therefore I was still getting to know them. My data was limited. Nonetheless, as I think back to that moment, I was acutely aware of a wrestle in me: do I name what I think is the harshness this person applies to themselves, do I soften, do I shy away entirely? The truth is, a few years ago I would not have done what I actually did; I would have facilitated but not named the edge as directly.

“How far do I go?”

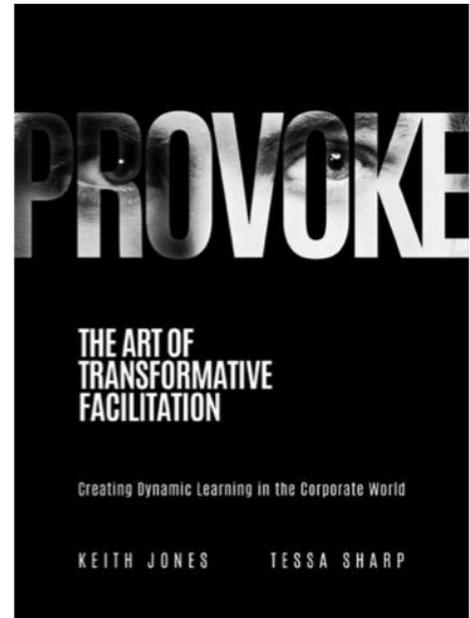
I made the following intervention:

Me: “On a scale of 1 to 10, how hard are you on yourself?”

Participant: “A 10 easily.”

Me: “I thought so.”

I was sure this was a challenging question. I was also ‘having a stab at hinting’, as my former tutor and colleague [Simon Cavicchia](#) would say – this is a kind of *informed intuition*, a term I have not come across until recently, in conversation with the author of this soon-to-be-published book.



The Art of Transformative Facilitation

That is the sub-title of a forthcoming book by [Keith Jones](#) and [Tessa Sharp](#), and ‘transformative facilitation’ is the nub of what I am discussing: facilitation that goes beyond the setting up of conditions for a container for learning, rather it asks the question: just how much learning are you really up for? As the facilitator, it sets a different challenge: to what extent are you prepared for the ‘edge and stretch’ that may be required?

Keith and I were discussing the edges of our own practice and where we see facilitation as being the most useful to clients. This idea of “informed intuition” I love. I confess I find the worshipping at the altar of intuition by some practitioners irritating and not a little depressing, as it is actually a blinkered form of black and white and either/or thinking. Daniel Kahneman’s work, e.g. in *Thinking, Fast Slow* (2012), in evidencing System 1 and System 2 thinking has, in recent years, gone some way to rebalancing the narrative around ‘intuition good’, ‘rationality bad’ that for a while seemed prevalent. A [wonderful conversation](#) between Kahneman and Gary Klein is worth a read here as well. Among the many insights they offered was this, from Klein:

‘It depends on what you mean by “trust.” If you mean, “My gut feeling is telling me this; therefore I can act on it and I don’t have to worry,” we say you should never trust your gut. You need to take your gut feeling as an important data point, but then you have to consciously and deliberately evaluate it, to see if it makes sense in this context. You need strategies that help rule things out. That’s the opposite of saying, “This is what my gut is telling me; let me gather information to confirm it.” ‘

In the context of the above, Keith's description of a "compressive intervention" is worth chewing on. This is not just an intervention that has an impact per se; rather by its very nature it intentionally seeks to increase the pressure in service of creating the conditions for greater shift. Here is the thing, though: there is no guarantee. Looking back at the exchange above, the truly 'compressive intervention', which hadn't even occurred to me until Keith suggested it, would have been to follow up with: "Why stop at 10, what's wrong a 12? ..." To point out that someone is a 10/10 has a utility; to invite them to consider just how much harder they *could* be on themselves creates the possibility that they may see that they are not really trying, and how inherently absurd it is to do so.

In a subsequent conversation, Keith made the point that the facilitator "treads a line between what is conscious and what is unconscious". That is not news to me; what it did, however, was to frame precisely what was going on for me in the exchange above.

The implications, which Jones and Sharp's book outlines in more detail apparently, are several. The facilitator needs to line up:

1. The timing of their intervention
2. Attention to their informed intuition
3. Their courage, specifically to "step into their inter-subjective self"
4. The role of courage and the willingness to step into the learning zone of the participant(s)

The above begins to lean into what in psychoanalytical terms is referred to as the 'third entity' (Stolorow, 2000). This arises in the interplay and relationship between therapist (or facilitator in this case) and client, whether the latter is one person or a group. Skilled facilitation of group dynamics involves playing with this third entity.

Evidence based interventions

Reflecting further on the above, it's worth offering a brief word on 'data', because, regardless of whether you are acting based on intuition or cognition, System 1 or System 2 Thinking or seeking guidance from your spirit guide or aliens, implicit in this is that you are doing so based on some form of data. That may be somatic, on your part and/or observations of your client(s), or felt, or informed by meaning in what is said/not said: all of these are data. Facilitative interventions without acknowledgement of what data is being used as a basis for choice, even if it is post-hoc and through reflection after the event, runs the risk of being a conscious and/or unconscious abdication of responsibility. I confess that I get deeply suspicious when I hear facilitators or practitioners of any persuasion place intuition above all else. To do so smacks of abdication of responsibility at the minimum, or more worryingly of a willingness to use intuition as justification for decisions that might have been more useful and supportive, but for a wee bit more engagement with our decision making faculties.

The subjective and inter-subjective dance of challenge

Assuming that I set out to 'challenge' in my facilitation, how do I know it is enough? How do I calibrate the reach and depth of challenge? Even if I have a crystal clear idea that I want to make an intervention that is going to provoke deeply, in service of learning and done with positive intent, I am still taking a leap of faith. I simply will not know how it will land until I act. The greater the degree of challenge I offer, the



If you can't 'dance', between what is going on in you, around you and between, then effective facilitation will be nigh on impossible more courage I potentially require. If I am probing in an area I know I have a developmental edge but I still choose to go there, then more so.

There is also another flavour of challenge here. What if I have become so used to showing up and intervening in service of my client, of doing so with a willingness and clear intention to go where I believe I need to in order to support the client to get the most out of whatever work we are coming together to do – in short: what if I begin to re-calibrate my own definition and experience of what 'challenging' is and is not? And what are the implications for my practice and, more importantly, for my clients?

To make this last point clearer, how *aware* am I of what is and is not challenging? If my frame of reference around challenge shifts and evolves over time, how will I know how that might be influencing how I therefore challenge others?

In the last two years, I have had a lot of observational feedback from friends, colleagues and clients about how I challenge and ask questions. I have different modes, depending on mood and context; sometimes this is done with awareness, sometimes not, and I am learning heaps from that on-going process. Recently, I had the privilege of having a mirror held up to me and my practice that confirmed something I had begun to suspect, but did not know for sure.

Reflections from a mirror: challenge is subjective

Working with another group, in checking out at the end of the latest in a series of sessions, a delegate commented to the effect that they had valued and appreciated the level and depth of challenge I had brought.

Me: "Do you want more challenge next time?"

Participant: "God no! That was enough – just right, but wouldn't want any more."

The good news: they genuinely appreciated the edge and stretch I offered. The edge for me, then, is that I have become so used to a level of directness and honesty, of comfort with others being like that with me, and offering similar to others and (generally) it having a deep – and useful - impact, that I have missed that my 'new normal' is actually, for some, way out of the norm. Intellectually, I knew this before, but I did not know it at the level of awareness I needed to, to make the connection in the moment to how this unfolds in my facilitation.

Implications for my practice

The risk with any summary relating to practice is the tendency towards overly neat conclusions and lists. Equally, I acknowledge that some highlighting of themes has utility, in terms of conveying what I believe are the key considerations. I offer the following, therefore, as pointers and things to ponder, rather than as a definitive list.

- The word 'facilitate' is the Latin for 'make easy'. Even if that is too literal and a more accurate reflection of what we do is something like 'making what is difficult easier to address/work with', the risk is that success becomes equated with removing or moving away from difficulty. At one level, yes, and without acknowledging the shadow of that – that we do not serve clients always by staying with what is easy for us or them – the risk is that opportunities for transformative learning are missed.
- Without dialogue with clients around what is challenging and what is not – or more accurately around where the edge is and what is the degree of stretch that they are seeking/need – we run the risk of assuming that we already know.
- The context makes a difference, particularly if one's facilitation is that of an internal as opposed to an external practitioner. In recent years, I have noticed that OD and other internal change agents or consultants seem to get lumped in with externals. The dynamics of working as an internal are significantly different, as the double binds are more acute and the consequences sharpened as you make choices – in the moment or strategically – around when and how deep to challenge.

- One of my colleagues at Roffey Park, [Sue Binks](#), early in my time at the organisation when we first worked together, said to me that facilitation, when you are working at the edge with groups and getting into the 'mush', is like "skiing down a black run, off piste, blind folded and with both hands tied behind your back." That has stayed with me ever since as a neat metaphor for both the adrenaline rush of not knowing what the hell you might discover as you work with group dynamics, and the hat tip to the fact that it could all go [Pete Tong](#). Which is the point: as facilitators, we get things wrong, and a willingness and humility to work *with* that, in the here and now, is crucial.

I don't have anything to add at the moment, as it will by definition be a list that changes over time as I learn (or don't). For now, that suffices. However, here's a final suggestion for what we might usefully hold in mind. The moment a facilitator takes her/himself too seriously, they have missed the point. If we lose sight of our inherent absurdity and fallibility, we miss out on the 'serious play' that can be enjoyed and engaged in.

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About Steve

Steve is an independent Organisational Development consultant, facilitator and coach. His work focuses on three areas: Digital & Modern Leadership, Organisational Change & Transformation, and Practitioner Development. He is Co-Chair of the Organisational Development Network Europe, is part of Roffey Park's OD Faculty on their qualifications programmes, where he remains an Associate, and is currently working on a number of new projects relating to his core areas of interest, which if you buy him a coffee he will happily talk to you about.

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