



Sharing experiences of facilitation through writing

Part 2

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Development



Edition Editors: Steve Dilworth and Bob MacKenzie

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Sharing experiences of facilitation through writing: dress rehearsals

Steve Dilworth and Bob MacKenzie



Keywords

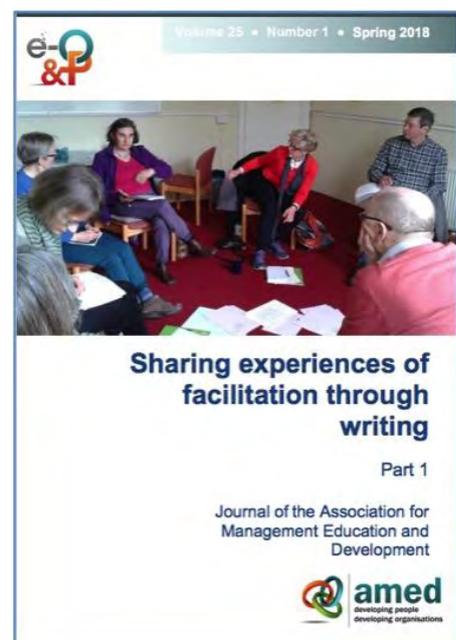
Co-editing, co-facilitating, autoethnography, critical friendship, authoring, writing, performance

Joined-up writing

It was something of a surprise to find ourselves co-editing one journal, and then, like waiting for buses, another comes along in quick succession. [Our previous editorial](#) for the Spring 2018 edition of *e-O&P* described how our editorial collaboration came about through a process of initial conversation, developing and offering co-facilitated workshops and using the latter as a vehicle for our 'Invitation to Contribute' to the journal.

Initially, we were inundated with expressions of interest from writers, some with experience of that special fear of exposure that is part of the lot of being a writer. As the Spring edition evolved, some of these willing souls found that life threw up obstacles, the unexpected happened, or they were simply not quite ready to submit their work for publication.

Hence, we're delighted to be able to offer this follow-up edition as another, more timely opportunity for such writers to showcase their work in ways that illustrate various aspects of the relationship between facilitation and writing. In the Spring 2018 edition, we worked with an organising metaphor of facilitation and writing as



rehearsals for a performance. Casting the contributions in this collection as dress rehearsals seems to us to provide a sense of continuity and connection between the two editions.

Dress rehearsal: 'full, uninterrupted rehearsal'.

(Thesaurus.com).

Here, drawing on years of practice, authors rehearse their carefully annotated scripts, which indicate detailed stage lighting and directions, before an invited audience. This is your special preview, where you can sit back and be informed, educated, entertained and - perhaps, at times - provoked.

Sustaining critical friendships

One of the challenges in extending into the Summer edition has been to maintain the high level of attention - critical friendship - that we offered to our previous contributors. Regular contact through emails and phone calls, along with occasional face-to-face meetings has enabled us to maintain our editing collaboration. We've also done our best to engage with authors in similar vein.

Our experience of editing in this way has felt almost like a sacred task. Our desire always to be positive and reassuring has been tempered and extended to include the key function of enabling all of the authors to show their work at its best, and to serve as custodians of [AMED's values](#). In writing, this means grappling with how best to offer feedback through suggestions and comments that aim to move the latest draft towards a final polished article.

As co-editors of this edition, our regular conversations focused mostly on our latest reading of each article. Our style of reading and commenting has been consistent with the approach we took to the Spring edition, in which we wrote:

'... we have done our best to place our different and complementary styles and interests at the service of both contributors to and readers of this edition. We leave it to you to judge whether you think we have succeeded.'

Noticing features of our approach to editing

As we reflected on the latent principles underpinning our collaborative feedback methods, we noted that several key features were beginning to emerge. These include our instincts to: work with reasonably flexible deadlines, diplomacy, spontaneity, considered decisions, using supportive language and balancing written and oral – and never anonymous - feedback.

Flexible deadlines

We noticed a degree of flexibility creeping into our initial approach to working within tight deadlines. This stemmed from an awareness that we were curating the writing efforts of a number of authors who were simultaneously busy with other tasks in life and work. (Similar distractions are also at work with the editorial team). It strikes us that this may be a distinctive feature of the *e-O&P* journal, in that most professional journals will set - and adhere to - strict, inflexible deadlines. We wonder whether our flexibility has been a help or a hindrance, and guess that each (prospective) author and editorial team member will have their own view on this. Mindful that individual experiences will differ, we can say that any shifts in our editorial approach to timescales have been consistently intended to be facilitative.

Diplomacy

We know that any comments on writing, whether or not oral, face-to-face, or written from a distance, can be experienced as hurtful criticism, even though our intention may have been clearly framed and intended in a constructive way that links [the notion of 'critical' with 'friendship'](#). Careful negotiation of meaning and understanding is therefore vital.

Spontaneity

We noted how often our first, independent impressions of the latest draft we received were to be trusted. As co-editors, our comments differed in style, but our fundamental sense of the writing was similar. There was a practical usefulness to this immediacy. Whilst our aim was always to share feedback between the two of us before offering it to the authors, we could, if one or other of us was not available, offer timely feedback to authors – and to each other - without having to wait for the other to respond first.

Decisions before writing to contributors

The decisions we took before offering written (and in some cases, oral) feedback were always mindful of the potential impact on contributors. We both noted an element of anxiety, in us, in the gap between our sending feedback to, and waiting to hear back subsequently from, authors. Invariably, we felt a sense of significant relief when they reassured us that they had received our comments with gratitude.

Supportive language

We preferred the language of support when contacting writers who we thought might need an extra – gentle - reminder, e.g. as deadlines approached. We never saw this as 'progress chasing'.

Feedback in writing

There is something quite different about interpersonal, face-to-face feedback. One can look another person in the eye, develop and deliver [the \(in\)famous feedback sandwich](#) and gauge their reaction, including non- verbal cues and clues. After delivering written feedback electronically, when the send button is pressed, our only chance is to make amends later if the recipient has felt it as a blow. When discussing this challenge in the Kennington Coffee Shop one Friday lunchtime, prior to a meeting of the AMED Writers' Group, we wondered whether this might have something to do with the process inherent in 'The Johari Window'. Here, when sensitive feedback may be necessary, the Blind, Hidden and Unknown Areas are often best enlarged through the mediation of feedback, sensitively and bravely offered and received face-to-face.

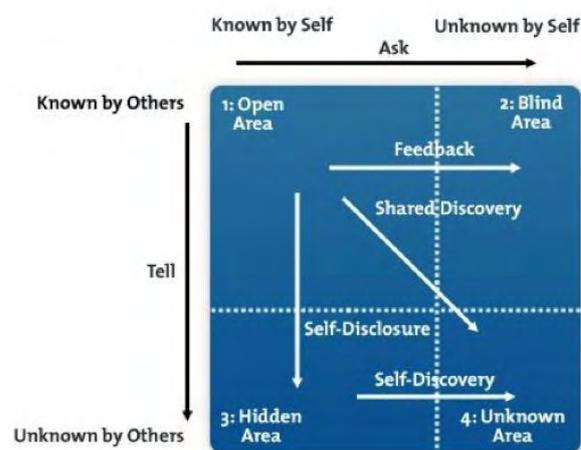


Fig 1: The Johari Window: (From "Of Human Interaction," by Joseph Luft. © 1969. Reproduced with permission)

An overview of the articles in this edition

As in the Spring 2018 edition, the articles in this edition are all drawn from the lived experience of the writers as facilitators. From this common ground has sprung a wide range of perspectives.

Writing in a refreshing and contemporary style, **Michael Ambjorn** explores how writing can be both practical and facilitative, especially when the writer is supported by 'critical friends' who help to ensure that their writing is the best it can be. He introduces us to, and acknowledges generously, several of his own critical friends, and to some excellent tools and techniques. Helpfully, Michael draws our attention to relevant literature and online resources that can support our efforts to act as critical friends to authors. His catalogue includes simple feedback measures, attention to the 'tone of voice' of our articles, and checking mechanisms for 'readability'.

Grounded in her experience of facilitating women victims of the Troubles in Northern Ireland, **Vicky Cosstick** distinguishes clearly between 'writing as product' and 'writing as process'. She identifies different audiences for writing, each of which requires a particular style. Then, she explains how she notices and decides to use the tension between these differences to energise a hybrid approach to working at a facilitative edge. Vicky makes a compelling case for writing as process as a means to facilitate real change.

Steve Hearsom reflects on his own development as a facilitator in a way that will resonate powerfully with others. For Steve, 'learning edge' is a core notion, which has changed/moved for him significantly over the years, enabling him to make and accept challenge more readily. Steve reflects on the impact of his greater ease in working at this edge, to the benefit of both himself and on the individuals and groups who he facilitates. He also makes a strong case for the use of evidence-based interventions. He is not against intuitive facilitation per se, but he argues strongly that this should be supported by data.

Paul Levy reflects deeply on the differences he has observed, within his own practice as a facilitator, between writing with a pen (manuscript writing) and using digital tools for writing. He gives examples of his own written reflections and explains how he uses them to support the groups he works with. Paul makes a soft hypothesis – open to further study - that writing by hand can lead to deeper reflection, more people-based ideas and ultimately better facilitative outcomes. His style is conjectural, preferring the language of 'maybe' rather than definitive suggestions or claims. In doing so, he invites us to examine our own use of writing as facilitators.

Bella Mehta writes with a keen emphasis on how her facilitation work is essentially based on relationship. Her valuing of other people, clients, colleagues, writers and teachers, shines through her enquiry into the positive impact of facilitation on organisational life. Bella cautions us not to be seduced by inappropriate positive thinking, instead encouraging us to see, feel and work through difficulties that lie under the surface of day-to-day reality. Her summary includes a heartening example of the way facilitation can make a difference.

Through the creative use of a novel that inspired his article, and drawing upon episodes from his 'childhood story' (Kantor 2012), **Bob MacKenzie** provides a brief, deep, insight into his formative years, as the basis for tracing his development as a 'learning facilitator' in puzzling over the bigger issue of 'facilitator identity'. He then weaves these disclosures into his current working world, and proposes an organising theme that writing, learning and conversations are closely intertwined. Through his writing, Bob illustrates the three principal roles that he identifies - namely those of learning facilitator, scholar practitioner and critical friend. He invites

colleagues to assess for themselves the usefulness or otherwise a *vade mecum* that he's been developing to inform his work as a 'writing-as-learning facilitator'. Bob's current interest in 'writing in a social space' is the latest development in a life-long learning journey.

John Sweet highlights his inner relationship between a particular system of 'reflection as facilitation' and the journaling stepping stones he has developed and adopted to make that method his own. Through use of a series of audio recordings of his facilitation, crossing many years of his practice, he uncovers and reconsiders memories of 'how things went' that he has held as good and bad. John ends on an optimistic note that groups can be forgiving of many facilitative mistakes. Perhaps we facilitators could be similarly forgiving of ourselves?

Complimenting the authors and complementing each other

As in the Spring 2018 edition of *e-O&P*, we are delighted by the quality of contributions that we are proud to present here. We congratulate the authors on articulating so tellingly their experiences of, and thinking and feelings about, facilitation and writing in its various forms and contexts. We hope that you enjoy and benefit from reading these articles as much as we have done co-editing them in a spirit of critical friendship. As we've written elsewhere, as co-editors, we've done our best to place our different and complementary styles and interests at the service of contributors to, and readers of, this edition. We leave it to you to judge whether you think we have succeeded.

Acknowledgements

In addition to **the authors** who appear here, this edition could not have come about without the invaluable contribution of many different people. So many, in fact, that it would be difficult to name them all personally. However, we cannot let the vital backroom contribution of **David McAra** pass unrecognised. As he has been doing on AMED's behalf for many years, David has patiently and expertly fielded all the pre-formatted versions of individual articles with which guest editors bombard him towards the end of any particular publication cycle, and burns quantities of midnight oil in creating the particular aesthetic form for which *e-O&P* is noted. As a member of the *e-O&P* editorial board, he has also been a cornerstone of AMED's publishing enterprises for well over a decade.

The AMED editorial support team of **Linda Williams**, **Julia Goga-Cooke** and **Ned Seabrook** have also played their largely unseen part, as have all the participants in our various **AMED Writers Group** and other Gatherings and exchanges so far. To everyone who has contributed wittingly or unwittingly to our publishing project, we offer our grateful acknowledgements, and invite your continuing participation. (We're hoping to arrange a post-publication Gathering in late Autumn or early Winter 2018. So watch this space for more details).

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About Steve and Bob

Steve (steve.dilworth@gmail.com) is deeply interested in the process of facilitation, and in particular in what helps/hinders facilitator presence. Most of his work is currently in the public sector, often supporting staff in areas where there is a high degree of emotional labour, e.g. end of life care, custodial settings and mental health.

Bob (bob_mackenzie@btopenworld.com) is commissioning editor of *e-O&P* and convenor of the AMED Writers' Group. His abiding interest is in the potential of all forms and formats of writing, text and conversation, interacting, to foster meaningful personal, organisational and societal learning and development.

A note about AMED



AMED stands for the Association for Management Education and Development, www.amed.org.uk. We are a long-established membership organisation and educational charity devoted to developing people and organisations.

Our purpose is to serve as a forum for people who want to share, learn and experiment, and find support, encouragement, and innovative ways of communicating. Our conversations are open, constructive, and facilitated.

Through AMED, we strive to benefit our members and the wider society. Exclusive Member benefits include excellent professional indemnity cover at a significant discount, free copies of the quarterly journal *e-O&P*, and discounted fees for participation in a range of face-to-face events, special interest groups, and our interactive website. We aim to build on our three cornerstones of **knowledge**, **innovation** and **networking** in the digital age. Wherever we can, AMED Members, Networkers and Guests seek to work with likeminded individuals and organisations to generate synergy and critical mass for change. www.amed.org.uk, or contact **Linda Williams**, our Membership Administrator, E: amedoffice@amed.org.uk, T: 0300 365 1247