



# Sharing experiences of facilitation through writing

## Part 2

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# Facilitating for reflection, one stepping-stone at a time

John Sweet



## Keywords

Reflection, Learning, Facilitation, Writing, Dialogue, Change, Journaling

## Introduction

Since 2011, I have been facilitating a particular form of Reflective Writing retreat workshops, which run sequentially over a period of six days. This is quite a demanding brief which follows an established protocol of quiet reflection, where sections of a reflective journal are verbally introduced, one reflective process at a time. In this journal, all life experience has a place where it can be described and elaborated. Unlike most teaching models, facilitators do not introduce any new writing content, just suggestions on how and what to write from participants' prior knowledge and experiences to aid their learning. [See Appendix A with a list of standard Journal section headings]

Participants have kindly permitted me as a facilitator to audio record a number of these workshops in an attempt to identify good practice in facilitating such workshops and possible strategies for improvement.

## Ethnography and autoethnography

On reflection, I think of Ethnography as the ultimate qualitative methodology for such a project. Despite being probably the most widely used and comprehensive qualitative method, I have the image of a fairly simple process. However, here, I have been asked to adopt an autoethnographic approach to write about how I have come to understand my own approach to facilitating for learning and reflection.

*Auto-ethnography* is a different matter altogether. In my own case, I cannot but have an underlying concern and question about how I have best performed in helping participants learn? My facilitation has its own history and learning curve. At times it has been a rocky climb, sometimes more like wading through swampy undergrowth. But it has not been without pinnacles of serene and rewarding engagement. My facilitation has its own life, so here, I follow a process that mirrors how I facilitate in reflective journaling workshops. In this, one fundamental process is to place life's sequences into named 'steppingstones', to gain a sense of the continuity of experience (Progoff, 1992) Table 1 below is an example of stepping stones I have drawn up for my own practice.

## My facilitation steppingstones

Table 1. My facilitation for reflection steppingstones

- Not letting the teacher take over
- Do not tell others what to do
- Support others to take responsibility
- Use of storyline and props
- A Long Story
- Humour – one liners
- Life in events, organisations and society
- Action Learning Discussion processing
- From a position of strength, visit the haunted house

The rest of this piece is organised around these stepping-stones.

## My recorded history

My facilitation experience/practice has been a personal learning curve recorded over the years from original reel-to-reel audiotape to compact discs, and will possibly end up in the clouds? I enjoyed pushing the bounds to get learners to question. That seems fundamental. My 'best of times' facilitating appeared to be when I mobilised the greatest resources for the learners and when I was willing to take the greatest risks. On occasion, I have dipped into these recordings. Re-visiting the early ones has been hard work emotionally.

## Underpinning theory and practice

More recently I have adopted a more relaxed approach of support, taking care to create the right atmosphere and storyline to encourage learning. In this, *Appreciative inquiry* (Cooperrider, 2005:) has been a major influence. To be able to say unconditionally that this is the best I can be learning or doing has a profound effect on all that follows. As Reed (2007) says “what works gives life to a community, group, or person, we participate in the construction of the reality of potential”. On the other hand, “If we ask questions about problems, we create a reality of problems.”

*Accelerated learning* literature (e.g. Rose, 1985) advocates a range of positive approaches to learning where the right motivational feel or atmosphere is essential, as is gaining an overall picture of



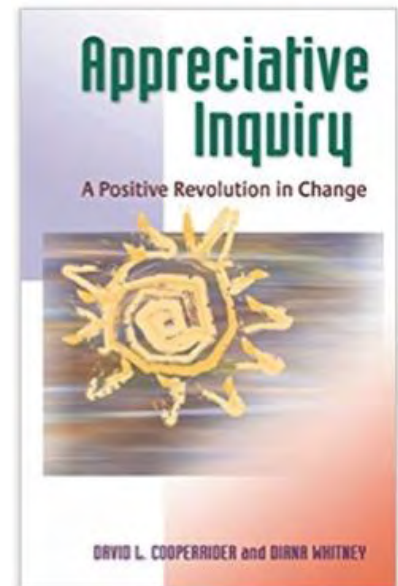
Ira Progoff with his Journal folder, taken for the Baltimore Sun in 1988  
Copyright John Sweet)

questioning. The original action learning process is a deficit model, starting with a problem, but this can be effectively inverted and subverted with talk of opportunities.

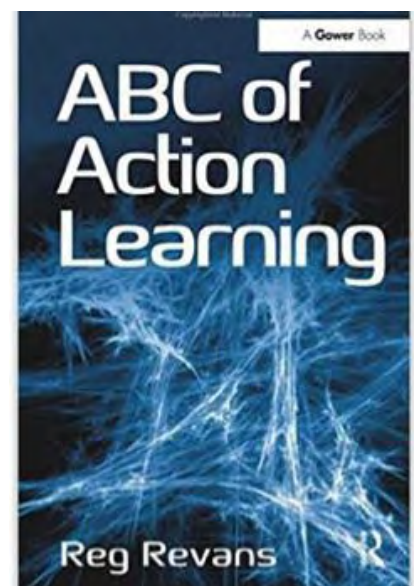
materials to learn and identifying and working with your own best ways of learning.

In addition, learning is enhanced by reflective practices. I enthusiastically follow two main methods of reflective practice. The first is following a *Journal method* (after Progoff, 1992), where experiences are logged in a similar way as in a diary. Unlike the diary, however, we work with these experiences in a non-judgmental way with a set of processes to take feelings, ideas and actions forward with some direction.

The second is that of *Action Learning* (after Revans; 1998) which entails unpacking issues by careful supportive



A first readable and influential volume on Appreciative Inquiry



Reg Revans' introduction to Action Learning

## **The Dark Side – visiting the Haunted House**

But there is a black hole in my personal history of facilitation which predates my current uptake of appreciative inquiry. Like visiting a haunted house, you know there are unpleasant things there to tease you, but you do not know if or when they will appear. Following an apparent success at a workshop at the Staff and Educational Development Association (SEDA) conference in 2005, I formulated another session in 2006, which, as I remember it, went terribly wrong. Was I taking one risk too many, gratuitously juxtaposing noisy, active social engagement with more than a moment of quiet introspection as a group activity? I certainly remember making some participants uncomfortable, judging from their body language. So dark it was, that I have never until now returned to that 2006 recording – clearly a missed opportunity for reflection.

For this article, I've adopted an appreciative focus. I girded my loins, and listened to that CD for the first time in 12 years, to see what I can learn from what at the time I perceived as a horrible experience.

## **My facilitation steppingstones, one-by-one**

In what follows, I discuss key elements of realisation about my facilitation formulated in my steppingstones (see Appendix A), one-by-one, virtually in historical order. The exception is that black hole of ghostly memories, which I will unpack for the very first time, but leave until last.

## **Not letting the teacher take over**

A teacher is usually obsessed with a particular content or discipline, whereas a facilitator is more obsessed with the learning. At the start, attempting facilitation, I was talking too fast and for too long, acting centre stage as teacher. Fortunately, as I listen, participants would spring into life once liberated to do so, apparently forgiving my digressions and attention seeking.

## **Do not tell others what to do**

*'Do not tell people what to do, rather support others in reaching for third-party standards and goals.'*

This was the advice of a developer who had the difficult task of turning round the nationalised Flour Mills, when I was working in Trinidad as a lecturer in dentistry in the early 1990s. His other insight was that of course you needed to have your participants on board following your strategy. However, in a group, probably around 40% of active members is enough to elicit change. So not to panic!

## **Support others to take responsibility: moving from teaching to facilitation**

Teaching in a 'past life' of clinical dentistry, my first thoughts might have been that dental students need to be organised and told what to do all the time: a traditional Higher Education clinical training. My investigations into (dental) chairside teaching (Sweet et al, 2008) subsequently found that dysfunctional family relationships between lecturer and students sometimes prevailed. Students would hate being humiliated by a grumpy dysfunctional "father", and dentistry consultants complained that students were behaving like "naughty children". In dental teaching much clinical work is repetitive and in a workplace setting, so that organisational rules and values relating to standards of behaviour can be formalised. In a dental clinic, students would work in six pairs, respectively as operator and assistant. The traditional role of teachers would be to organise everything and supervise each of the workstations in turn.

### Students taking responsibility as organisers

Instead of this, I imbibed the “Adult Learning” literature (Knowles, 1980) and acted to give students responsibility as clinical organisers and recorders. The pairs would arrange briefing sessions at the beginning of the clinic to check that all were present, sort out late appointments, and record the clinical work done in such a way as to emphasise group learning. They would video record the learning of individual pairs so that all could view a short video clip of each pair on a TV at a debriefing session at the end of the clinic. As facilitator, and lead clinician, I was thus freed up time from organising to be available for more clinical demonstration and advice on treatment planning, some of which could be recorded and viewed by everyone. As a group, we could learn from each other through watching video clips and sharing experiences. Good facilitation seems to be about putting the learners in a good place for self-directed learning and enabling them to take action and collective responsibility.



Students acting as clinical organisers and recorders.

Far from children goofing around, these were smart professionals concerned for their patients, ensuring that advice they received was up-to-date and from scientific sources, and all behaviours were to a high standard.

### Adult learning principles: andragogy

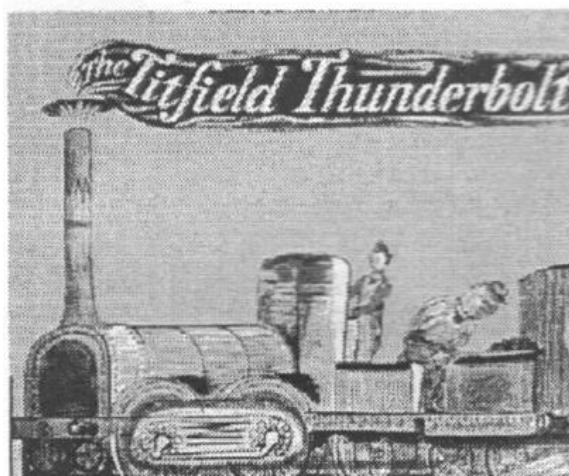
Knowles' (1980) fundamentals of adult learning came to light in front of our eyes. Students knew why they were learning, and could choose what they needed to learn. They were starting to accumulate their own resource of experience and knowledge. Their learning was related to real life action and was task orientated. Good learning occurred especially when they were tapping into their own unique capacity for learning. Seeing learning as a journey appeared to give insight into integrating different aspects of learning and embrace

change, especially when being engaged and voluntarily “on-board”. Good examples and choice of resources that I as facilitator had made available in this new environment helped the whole group progress with their learning and ensure that nobody was left behind.

### Use of storyline and props: the talk of a SEDA Conference

Stepping on this stone, I based the whole workshop on the story of a circumscribed journey, with one session leading to the next with a sense of immediacy or timing. I used short presentations to set the scene to emphasise the purpose of each session and to make them sufficiently challenging and not too lengthy. And they were goal- and task-focussed.

I gave each participant a printed rail ticket to induce a sense of belonging, and set out seats like railway carriages. An early introspection session was a short break from a speeding journey being ‘shunted into a siding’ for a time. Appreciative inquiry demonstrated a practical aspect to help frame the whole workshop in a positive light. I brought along a mass of materials with which to model standards, setting up stations in which the groups could work, to produce a story that could be videoed. Magnets on strings, piles of money, coins of all different sorts and sand with various creatures, floats and water, were all on display. One enterprising group discovered, located in the room,



A recovered B&W image of the original full colour rail ticket used in the workshop



Improvising with coat-hangers

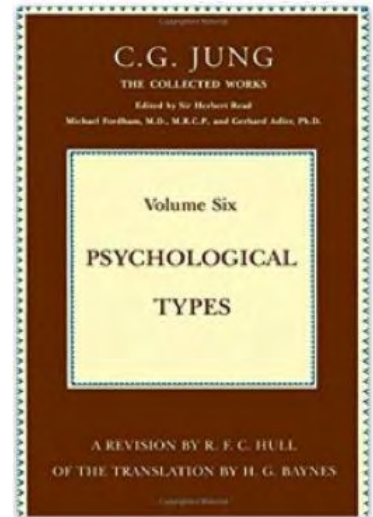
some different shaped coat-hangers and a stand for their short programme. I recorded each modelling over a period of 10 minutes. And when finished, we all gathered around the TV and shared these video clips. Their story lines held up well. All manner of angles on ‘standards’ were raised from the various unusual takes demanded by the texture and form of the modelling materials. Overall, feedback was very positive and the workshop became the talk of the Conference. Individual participants expressed how useful they found the various materials to express the impact of standards and standard setting on their lives and their work, as well as in enabling an insight into other participants’ views and situations.



## A 'long' story

When I was a student at 22, I was interested in the then fairly new concepts of introvert and extravert. Just published was the English translation of Jung's book, *Psychological Types* (1971) which I purchased and went straight to read chapter 5. Here, Jung explains the concepts of 'intro' and 'extra' with reference to an epic poem "Prometheus and Epimetheus" by Carl Spitteler (1931). It is extraordinary, anthropomorphic and subjective. Prometheus is a slave to his own soul, who appears to him like a Goddess. She:

*approached him and laid both hands in greeting on his shoulders, inclined her head, and looked at him, glance for glance and eye to eye. And at her gaze his life died and rose again, his blood first seethed and then froze, and all his feelings became enslaved to her in boundless and self-forgetting love.*



One of my first purchases of Jung's work in translation

[Spitteler, 1931].



The glamorous library accession page

Because of this, Prometheus gets nowhere in the world, whereas his brother Epimetheus succeeds to become King. But he, Epimetheus has to rely on his conscience to guide him. This little animal goes hiding just at the wrong moments, and Epimetheus becomes discredited. Prometheus is called upon at the very end of the day to put things right.

Much later in life I return to reading Jung's *Psychological Types*, and once again decide to obtain a copy of "Prometheus and Epimetheus". After a detailed investigation I tracked the book down in a library. Inside the book was the exotic accession image I remembered. But more than that, on page 69 there was a clearly marked 'J' (for John) in pencil! I had defaced this book 34 years before in 1969. Tears came to my eyes – reunited with the self-same book. Sometimes a heart-warming interlude can produce a valuable 'stand and stare' moment!

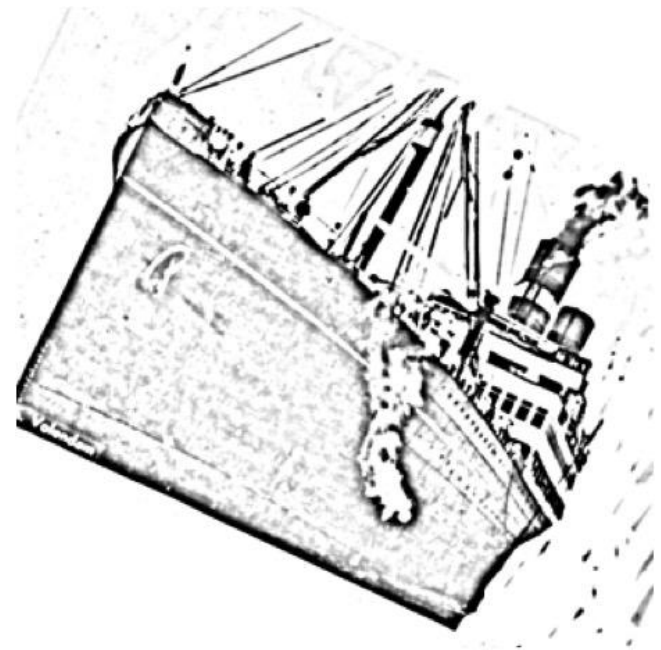
## Humour – one liners

When you are writing Steppingstones in the Journal process, these are relevant to your situation now, and are not supposed to be an attempt at historical accuracy. They are more in alignment to the world of Prometheus and Epimetheus, but with relevance to the ways things are moving for you now. When talking about this, I often quote a lady in the States who used to say, when talking about her life Steppingstones: *my ex-husband fell off my list of Steppingstones 10 years ago, and I don't think he is coming back on, anytime soon!*

### Life in events, organisations and society

My mother is 90 now, but every 30<sup>th</sup> August she remembers vividly that date because of events in 1940. The first torpedo hit the cruise liner, SS Volendam, on which she was a passenger, in the bow. It exploded and the vessel started to keel over. A second torpedo sank into the ship but did not go off. 350 children, including my mother, were transferred to lifeboats and then to other merchant shipping to make a return journey to Britain only, never reaching Canada, which was their original destination. So after that event, do you think my mother has ventured out on the high seas much in her life? What this illustrates is that an event can act like a bully, and have a life of its own, ready to torment. In the Journal

process it is possible to dialogue with the 'person' behind the event. Once a dialogue has taken place, the perspectives that person holds will never be the same again. The unreasonable bully can lose its power. Such dialogue, created by people, gives them permission to move on!



The torpedo exploded and the ship started to keel over.

### Action Learning group discussion processing

Reg Revans (1998) devised a method of reflective practice to empower those working at the 'coalface' of businesses and organisations. Each member of a small group has 'airtime' to voice issues that are important, stimulated by being asked questions, crafted by other members of the group. Much is gained from the cohesion of the group, by not giving advice, in a spirit of confidentiality and honesty. Group learning is largely gained through an important additional phase of 'group discussion processing'. Dedicated time is given to discussing the processes that occurred in the session they have just experienced. Asking "What on earth is going on?" can sometimes be transformative for individuals and groups and a useful tool to the facilitator's box.

Now, we return to what I've been putting off for so long.



Re-visiting the offending CD

### From a position of strength, re-visiting the haunted house

## The horror audio

The offending CD I mentioned earlier took quite some time to find. Initially, I thought (perhaps, even secretly hoped?) it was lost. Found, I slipped the CD into the rarely used bay on my laptop, expecting it not to work or get stuck. But no, the audio came through strong and clear. I found that the session had already started at the point when participant pairs were in plenary reporting on “What evidence-informed means to me”. To my surprise the participants appeared enthused, even ebullient, and the points made were wide-ranging and thoughtful, but I had left no time to reach a consensus, even if that were possible. I had just carried on with my pre-set plan, asking “How closely attached to this concept or thing do you feel?” I then rambled on, going through reflective Journal process theory interspaced with meditation, following a calming storyline.

The stares and body language from just a few participants is inaudible, but some explained later how they felt.

The mixed response from participants' feedback for the last 20 minutes showed a willingness for participants to make the most of what was offered. Nobody walked out. Half a dozen explained how they had difficulty and could not link the topics of evidence-informed and journaling, but just as many thought the Journaling relevant to life issues and especially to reflecting on change. Two presented what you might call inane ideas. Two thought that they might get the link to work, but that they would both go about it a different way.

It's like I am not supposed to sit and do meditation - to do that in academia. We have not had permission to work so - We must work at the rational and intellectual level And to do this workshop - I know I wouldn't do it like this - have to have some lead in!

A final comment was that “Some people have had quite deep insights”.

I had a problem with the evidence-based until I found the points you made about the stepping stones making something evident to you. So I feel when I go back to these notes later on my own it will be part of a reflective practice and will give me insights into what is evident in the material.

## Some insights from this

So it was uncomfortable to listen to this 12-year-old recording of the workshop, but it was not without merit in gaining a range of insights about my rambling style, what the meanings of ‘evidence-based’ or ‘informed’ could be, and eliciting some appreciation of Journaling as a method of self-development. Compared to the 2005 workshop, that of 2006 lacked the links and cohesive story to hold the different parts together. The story did not flow and opportunities to return to the evidence-informed ideas were not followed up. I did not use the wide range of physical and digital materials and technology as a resource. In particular, the session lacked immediacy, that precious quality to ensure good timing for events. But it was not without humour:

What I was actually thinking follows from what you are saying about spontaneity and creativity and where they come from. What I found really useful from that is that you can be fundamentally lazy and do nothing, because I am often worried about busy people. They often tell me they're busy and they do bugger all! I'm not a busy person. I'd rather read a magazine and engage in anything intellectual and be superficial as well. But doing that, perhaps allows the waters to stir in an unconscious way. So I can tell my colleagues how busy they are: that they're just clinging to rapture land. I just tell them to get on with it and stop moaning.

## Final thoughts: confronting – and learning from – past experiences.

With this gift of hindsight, I need not have hidden for so long from a 12-year-old audio recording. It helped me to define what makes good and bad facilitation. Staff and educational developers can be such caring and forgiving participants when being facilitated by one of their colleagues.

## Appendix A: Some Journal Sections

- Following Shifting of Perspectives
- Influences on where you are now
- Steppingstones of events over time
- Memories of roads taken
- Roads not taken
- Inspiration from images
- Following lines of wisdom and connection

Dialogue with perspectives for change

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## About the author

John Sweet is currently Programme Lead of the Postgraduate Certificate in University Teaching and Learning (PgCUTL) at Cardiff University and has various visiting roles supervising Masters dissertations and facilitating elements of reflective practice at other Universities. He has a particular interest in depth psychology and the work of Ira Progoff and Reg Revans and prefers to follow an appreciative approach advocated by David Cooperrider rather than a deficit problem-based one often appearing in the medical education literature.

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