



Sharing experiences of facilitation through writing

Part 1

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Developing a Facilitator Signature

Steve Dilworth



This article is about my experience of facilitating, gathered from several decades of willingness to "sit in the fire" (Mindell 1995). I draw upon my forthcoming book that will explore ways to develop 'distress free authority' when facilitating, as proposed by Heron (1989:39). My research concludes that achieving a distress free state is not necessarily possible or even useful.

Distress emanates from distraction of inner feelings that lead to a sense of discomfort. For me, distress occurs when I forget that my inner feelings hold useful data about what is happening in the group. Instead I get lost in my own bubble of anxiety and consequently become less effective.

In my view, facilitators need to learn how to reduce and/or manage distress in ways that enable an easy and confident use of authority. Crucially, we must use the rich source of data emanating from our own feelings in service of the groups that we facilitate. This includes helping group members to manage their feelings.

Like others, perhaps, I have grown as a facilitator through experience; key concepts and principles have become part of my way of being in groups. I have developed an idiosyncratic style, which I have come to recognise as my facilitator signature, which permeates this article. Breakdown before breakthrough

Key Words

Facilitation, signature, distress free authority, relationship

Introduction

As a rather shy person, given to listening much more than to speaking out, I find it odd that I became a facilitator. It is not surprising that my entry into this professional role was not planned - I simply responded to an invitation.

My earliest memory of facilitating

I vividly recall the first time I was asked to facilitate a group. This was more than three decades ago when, as a mental health practitioner, I worked with a group of nurses as they explored their understandings of psychological health.

I was nervous, and concerned that I might be put on the spot by difficult questions and thereby 'found out', i.e. found wanting. I remember the words of the person who had asked me to do this work, as I anxiously left her office: "Don't forget – they will be marginally more nervous than you!" This remains a helpful reminder that, in the life of groups, distress is certainly not confined to the facilitator.

I am now mostly employed as a facilitator and regard this role title as an umbrella term for a several functions that I perform: group leader, professional supervisor, coach, change agent and mentor. I frequently work in contexts where care is a key component, particularly within end of life, mental health and criminal justice settings.

Facilitating groups

I work with both individuals and groups, but I focus primarily on working with groups in this article. Groups can provide the most magical of experiences, where people come together and create a perfect dance of collaboration. Groups can also be tense, unproductive and even destructive, and can provoke feelings in the facilitator, and participants, that I call 'distress'.

Embracing distress as a difficult friend

It remains something of an emotional effort for me to facilitate groups. I know the accompanying sense of unease as one might know a close but difficult friend. Whilst I remain somewhat fearful of this dubious companion, I realise that uncomfortable feelings often provide a positive influence. I suspect that for many group facilitators, an edge of nervousness is a necessary and rich resource.

Fellow facilitators tell me about their own inner difficulties that have the potential to upset their equilibrium. It seems to me that to facilitate means to accept and work with a degree of anxiety. This is common to many disciplines, such as teaching, acting and all forms of leadership that involve standing up and standing out.

The importance of relationship

One striking feature of literature in the field of facilitation is the way in which the relationship between the facilitator and facilitated is pivotal. My lived experience supports this emphasis, in that I have never found it possible to facilitate without the willing consent of group members. I suggest that such consent is embodied in the relationship.

Knowing how to facilitate therefore has a fundamental concern with beginning, building, maintaining and utilising relationships. Good facilitation always requires a fertile relationship with those facilitated. You may use a string of clever quotes on empathy, totally understand compassion at an intellectual level, and even be well published in the field. But if you do not have the ability to relate to real people across a range of contexts, then such knowledge will not help you to facilitate effectively.

Facilitators cannot be expected always to get it right or to be able to relate to each individual in all circumstances. If only life were so simple! A friend once commented that given the complexities of relationship, it is a credit to the human race that we keep trying. This maxim applies to the contact facilitators have with people in groups.

Distress-free authority

My research into facilitation was stimulated by these words – 'distress-free authority', which is one of several criteria of excellence used to judge facilitator competence:

"You have distress free authority, and do not displace your own hidden pathology through your interventions."

Heron (1989: 139)

I realised that this assertion was important to me - but herein lay a problem. It seemed then (and still does) that this criterion was forever an aspiration rather than a competency. I initially clung to my wish to achieve it through an inner state of ease and elegant facilitation. This was a triumph of hope over experience.

Facilitator distress

As my research progressed, I felt compelled to turn from distress free as I stumbled upon the concept of facilitator distress. On one memorable occasion, I collapsed into doubting my right to offer services in exchange for payment.

This profound switch to distress occurred outside the comfort of my regular work places. As I prepared to facilitate a team from a high profile multi-national business, I assumed that my skills were transferable. In the event, this move to a new professional context provoked an intense and dramatic decline in my ability to be present:

It was a small group but the venue was big – a smart hotel – gold leaf framed mirrors that nearly covered the wall.

I looked up – all eyes were upon me. I looked down – my carefully prepared notes were a blur of hieroglyphics.

I was hot and clammy. I was also cold and sweaty.

This hideous experience profoundly challenged my assumption about transferable skills, and a wave of panic left me feeling stranded and startled. I rapidly lost confidence, and the signs of this were immediate and obvious. I was the rabbit and the headlights were bright and close.

Sometimes rabbits survive oncoming headlights; sometimes ... well you know what happens. I am glad to be here to tell the tale.

Addressing imposter syndrome

Thankfully, extreme collapse has been rare for me. I have however had several occasions when my anxiety and loss of confidence have escalated and provoked fear that I will be found out and found wanting.

I find it helpful to remember the notion of "Impostor Syndrome", as expounded in this TED Talk by Casey Brown. It's a well-documented phenomenon, first appearing in an article written by Clance and Imes (1978). The authors suggest that high-achieving women tend to believe they are not intelligent enough, and that their abilities are overestimated by others. My own experience, personal and in conversation with peers, suggests that this phenomenon is not gender specific.

Beyond extreme variations of distress I note a frequent level of discomfort. This manifests as a chronic background noise of anxiety as I facilitate; a hum floating back and forth - a vague awareness that occasionally reaches my conscious mind. I have had countless experiences of butterflies in my stomach when facilitating or anticipating a piece of work with a group.

My ability to label these feelings as anxiety or excitement depends on a complex array of circumstances and I reassure myself that, 'It is alright to have butterflies ... as long as you can get them to fly in formation.' When butterflies become the size of bats, a bigger problem is signalled that may be linked to deeper and unresolved distress within me.



From [Small Tortoiseshell \(*Aglais urticae*\)](#), Lichtenwalde, Germany by [Jörg Hempel](#), CC BY-SA 3.0 de,

Over-activity as a symptom of distress?

Indications of my increasing distress include hesitations and over-reliance on props, such as notes or video presentations. My wavering confidence leads me to try too hard, asking elaborate questions or several at a time (the latter can really confuse groups). I experience a greater sense of responsibility than can possibly be mine, forgetting that a group is made of the sum of its parts – and more.

I now regard such minor disturbances as blips, and adopt strategies for recognising these moments as 'data' about the group. My own flapability often mirrors the group I am with and/or the organisational context within which we are meeting.

Despite, or maybe because of, sensitivity to my inner feelings, I have been a respected facilitator for many years. I have repeating clients, whilst other work is mostly derived from referrals.

Despite the scary episode described above, I can see that the initial assumption that my skills are only suitable in my comfort zone was a limitation in my own thinking. I now have an increasing portfolio of experience which suggests that fruitful cross-over is possible. This feels like hard-won knowledge.

I have rarely experienced distress that has been so acute that it led to uncontrollable stage fright. Groups are not laced with danger - they simply need handling with care.

Distress-free authority as a criterion of facilitator excellence

To return to the criterion of excellence proposed by Heron (1989) i.e. distress free authority. I believe that this should be viewed as an aspiration that emphasises a need to use feelings wisely. Facilitators must take responsibility for their feelings and not displace their internal struggles onto the group. It can be easy to blame a group as 'bad' or 'resistant' when things do not go smoothly.

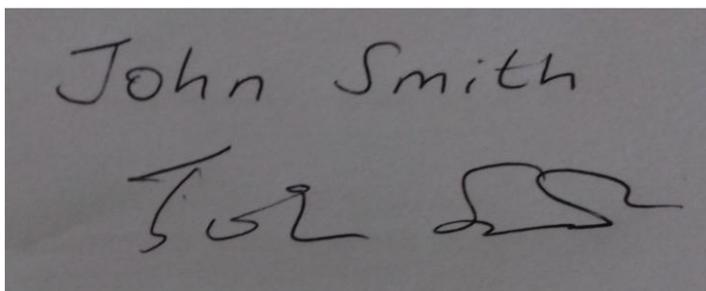
Taking responsibility can be the last thing on my mind when I make hapless attempts to disguise my feelings. Such blatant incongruence does not help - group members either directly notice discomfort in the facilitator or are subtly aware, sensing that something is amiss.

Excellence can be found in the degree to which we maintain our presence to the group simultaneously with maintaining presence to our internal dialogue and feeling state. It is from this in/out sensibility that we can use the rich seam of data that we have within.

Facilitator signatures

The ability to facilitate is a combination of skills, attitudes and experience. An overarching quality of 'presence' (see, e.g. Noon 2018, this edition) incorporates and transcends the component parts of our way of facilitating. I use the term 'facilitator signature', coined by John Heron (1999: 335), to encompass the unique mix that becomes our hallmark.

When we learn to sign our name, each letter is recognisable alone and in combination with other letters. The style of handwriting adopted by an individual gradually enables this string of individual letters to develop in a distinctive way. Sometimes the letters become unrecognisable within a hieroglyphic form that retains only a hint of the original – autograph hunters prize the illegible squiggles of their heroes.



To use a different analogy - it is said that Michelangelo was asked how he created the sculpture of David. He replied by suggesting that it was 'just a matter of chipping away those bits that did not look like David.' I think that this is similar to the development of one's facilitator signature: a process of becoming that is gradual.



[David by Michelangelo](#), Florence, Galleria dell'Accademia, 1501-1504

Image: Creative Commons by [Jörg Bittner Unna](#)

My facilitator signature

I am hesitant to break a concept up into imaginary parts especially when, as here, the sum of the parts is more than the whole. Nonetheless the following aspects of my own signature may help readers to recognise and develop elements of their own style. This section is based on self-observation and feedback from people I have facilitated, and from colleagues.

Listening

Listening is a discipline, a skill, an art, and is inextricably linked to facilitator presence. Listening is at the heart of my facilitator signature, and is fundamental to all of my roles, professional and personal. It is from the vast reservoir of things I have heard (listened to) that my forthcoming book on facilitation is drawn, including things I have overheard myself saying.

To listen well is not easy, although it can appear as if the listener is doing nothing. I chuckle as I remember one group member commenting that I was so laid back that I might as well be laid out - little did they know of the focus and concentration that I was putting into listening carefully.

Enabling others to feel heard

Maybe the best criterion on which to judge our ability to listen is that others report a feeling of being heard. When I listen well, “with the ears of the heart”, to words spoken and to those left unsaid, then all is well in my relationships within the world.

Herein lies the rub. I can't always maintain a deep ability to listen. None of us can hear everything. Understanding this variation has led me to place great importance on noticing disturbances in my attention. This awareness helps me to resume present attentiveness to others. In these circumstances, losing oneself is the way back to presence.

We must find ways to balance distraction from internal chatter with paying attention to useful inner promptings. I cannot say that I always achieve this standard. Sometimes I blunder in, thinking I have a bright idea to contribute. At other times I unhelpfully ask multiple questions when posing just one would be better.

The analogy of the waiter

As a facilitator, listening usually follows a brief period of talking. I make whatever introductory remarks that I judge vital to support a group to get started, e.g. outlining the themes; suggesting, generating and establishing ground rules and giving required information. I then draw back in order to maintain an active listening role that includes keeping a watchful eye on the unfolding group process. This means adopting and maintaining a subtle presence, occupying centre stage occasionally and temporarily, intervening only when necessary.

Consider a restaurant where the waiter returns to take orders at just the correct moment after settling the diners and offering the menu. The expert waiter is always subtle and inconspicuous and yet picks up precisely when diners are ready for their next course. The attributes of an excellent waiter are analogous to excellence in facilitation, where presence of the facilitator can also be subtle.

Metaphorically speaking, I occasionally spill hot soup into the lap of a diner. Maybe it is at these times that I need to draw most on the next key attribute of my facilitator signature.

Use of humour

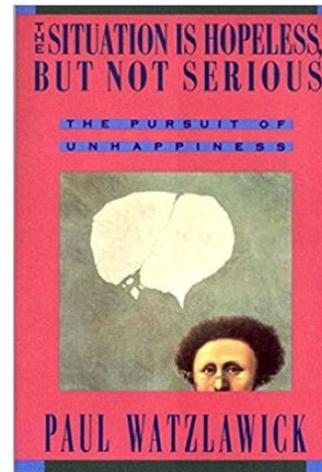
Humour often helps people to appreciate the funny side of situations, even when dealing with difficult issues. Drawing on humour does not mean joke telling, although a well-timed intervention of this type can work.

On the whole I prefer stories, e.g. those using the 'wise fool' to illustrate a point. Such tales remind me not to take myself, or life, too seriously. I regularly return to one particular book – '[The Situation is Hopeless but not Serious](#)' - maybe the title itself will be enough to encourage readers to seek it out.

One story relates to fixed beliefs and is about:

*"... the man who claps his hands every ten seconds.
When asked the reason for this strange behaviour, he
replies, 'To chase away the elephants.' 'Elephants?
But there aren't any around!' Whereupon the man
says, 'Right. See, I told you so.' ..."*

Watzlawick (1983: 53)



Stories can draw gentle attention to how people in groups hold onto entrenched patterns of learned behaviour long after they have ceased to be useful. Adding a simple facilitative question such as 'does that thing that you are doing still work for you?' can shift energy and lead to a rapid resolution of stuck-ness in groups.

A tangential form of humour is contained in tongue-in-cheek interventions, for example when people stick resolutely to behaviour that is not only ineffective but also causes them difficulty or harm. In such circumstances I might say 'you seem to be shooting yourself in the foot ... one toe at a time.' Gentle yet direct teasing raises the person's consciousness to what they are doing. This in turn enables new possibilities to be considered. Being conscious of how our behaviour appears can act like a mirror: if I see that my hair is windswept I can take action to straighten it.

As indicated in the previous example, I am particularly attracted to situational humour, where something about what is happening seems funny. I regularly meet groups within which there are different expectations regarding positive feedback. In a typical scenario, the manager is happy with the worker and leaves them to get on with the job, but the worker feels that the manager's silence suggests that something is wrong. When this issue surfaces, I tell the following story about people in close relationships:

One says: "Do you love me?"

The second responds: "Of course I do!"

The first counters: "Then why do you never tell me?"

The second explains: "I have told you once and when the situation changes, I'll let you know."

The use of humour can be risky because:

1. What I find funny may repel you
2. Jokes are often at the expense of another person or group

It is usually a risk worth taking but, as with any other facilitative technique, it is important to have a clear intention. I keep a watchful eye on my personal psychology in this domain, as part of me loves people to laugh at what I say. In this respect, I play at being the joker. Another part of me realises how shared laughter can move a group on from an impasse. In this respect, I play my part as facilitator.

Offering empowering self-disclosure

One further human skill for working with people is self-disclosure: this is another integral part of my facilitator signature. Disclosure does not mean thoughtlessly bombarding a group with a commentary on one's emotional state. Rather, it is a conscious act requiring attentive, skilled and judicious decision making.

Group facilitators must find ways to balance privacy and disclosure. Acquiring a neutral expression that portrays an appearance of impartiality will help at times. Paradoxically, sharing feelings in confident self-disclosure can be the most appropriate thing to do. Reassuringly, consistent feedback over many years suggests that my willingness to self-disclose empowers others to do likewise.

Self-disclosure is not just about saying what I think. It is most useful when disclosure includes reference to my feeling/emotional state. For example, if I feel a change in my breathing or heart rate that I interpret as anxiety, I pay attention to that change and may simply state how I am feeling, or what my emotion is, and ask whether this may be a reflection of the state of the group.

It is helpful not to labour the point at such times. Just because my feelings register as anxiety does not mean that the group is experiencing the same emotional state. I prefer an oblique or casual mention of my inner condition.

At times, self-disclosure is an internal process, disclosing to oneself in an act of conscious recognition. Simply and privately owning my feeling/emotional state helps me to let go of it and resume a clearer presence and attention.

Conclusion

In exposing my facilitator signature I hope to have prompted readers to consider their own unique ways of working with groups. The glimpses into my learning may resonate with readers and whet their appetite for further exploration. I hope that the alchemy of my writing and your reading will result in some advance in the art and craft of facilitation - both yours and mine.

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Steve is a facilitator and supervisor. Most of his current work is 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. steve.dilworth@gmail.com

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