



Sharing experiences of facilitation through writing

Part 1

Journal of the Association for
Management Education and
Development



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Edition Editors: Steve Dilworth and Bob MacKenzie

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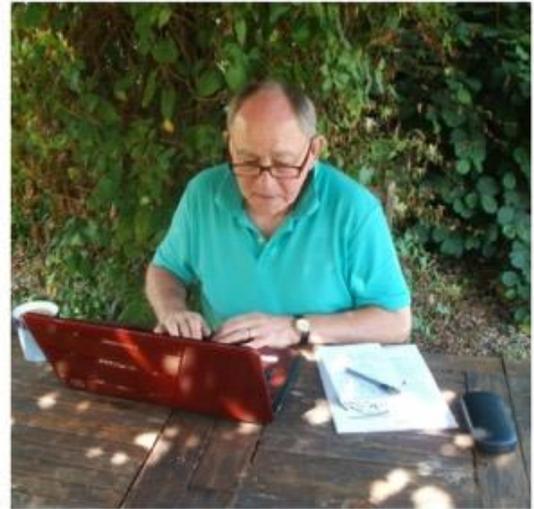
Cover image: A theatrical script rehearsal

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Sharing experiences of facilitation through writing: a rehearsal of ideas

Steve Dilworth and Bob MacKenzie



Keywords:

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

Introduction

In this introductory article, as co-editors, we sketch how this edition came about. We outline how and why we worked together as co-editors and with the authors, interweaving strands of autoethnography (e.g. [Wall 2006](#)), critical friendship (e.g. MacKenzie 2015), and writing, and highlighting the insights about facilitation that arise through the creative interrelationship between writing and conversations. Next, we provide an overview of the articles, with internal links to facilitate speedy connections when a reader's particular interest is triggered, and indicate what might happen after publication of this edition. This includes publishing a Part 2, Summer 2018 edition of *e-Organisations and People (e-O&P)* on the same theme, and a possible post-publication Gathering. We conclude by acknowledging with gratitude the essential work behind the scenes of several other people (as publishing inevitably requires), not least that of Bob's fellow *e-O&P* editorial board member [David McAra](#) (qv).

How this collaboration came about

From chance encounters between Steve and Bob early in 2016 through the AMED Writers' Group (AWG), this project has grown, perhaps a bit like [Topsy](#), a character from *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), who, asked about God, says "I s'pect I growed. Don't think nobody never made me." In addition to frequent contact between both of us in various forms since then, two workshops four months apart under the aegis of the AWG nurtured the evolution of this edition.

The first workshop

On 20 October 2017, Steve facilitated a session for the AWG on '[Sharing Experiences of Facilitation through Writing](#)'. There, he introduced the concept of autoethnography, an approach which permeated his doctoral studies (Dilworth 2008) and raised the prospect of co-creating a series of articles for the Spring 2018 edition of *e-O&P* through a form of facilitation called critical friendship (e.g. MacKenzie 2015). Participants responded enthusiastically to Steve's presence (Noon, this edition), and subsequently, to an [Invitation to Contribute](#). By this means, we encouraged others more widely to consider their ideas for an article. In doing so, we held out the prospect of a supportive editorial process informed by critical friendship, which is the hallmark of *e-O&P*'s approach to editing and curating contributions. Such is the quality and quantity of the responses we received, that we already have additional material for a Summer 2018 edition of *e-O&P* on the same theme, and there is the distinct possibility of a post-publication Gathering later in the year to explore how facilitated writing and conversations, interacting, can illuminate and enrich our understanding and practice of facilitation.

The second workshop

For the 16 February 2018 AWG workshop, we issued an invitation to prospective *e-O&P* authors and anyone else who might be interested to experiment with and assess the potential of critical friendship for their own purposes, whether or not they intended to write an article. Essentially, [Critical Friendships](#) in writing can arise when writers and well-disposed and suitably competent others contract with each other to giving and receiving sensitive yet rigorous challenge, encouragement and support in person. We do this on the assumption that, often, this helps to cushion writing-related anxiety, and to enhance the satisfaction of seeing and reading well-crafted ideas in print or on the screen.

Subsequently, not a few contributors have endorsed this approach, as exemplified by the following unsolicited feedback:

'I'm so thrilled to have my first ever article published in the Spring journal! And I'm so grateful for your patient support in helping me reach this point.'

We co-facilitated this second workshop, imagining that it might flow along the following lines (and, by-and-large, it seemed to do so):

- A brief introduction to critical friendship within the context of Steve's previous AWG session
- Experimenting with giving/receiving critical friendship
- Individual writing, and conversations about the experience of critical friendship
- More working in pairs or small groups
- Perhaps another brief spell of individual writing
- Review of individual ideas about writing, and reflections on critical friendship.

Co-editing and co-facilitation: some parallels?

Complementary similarities and differences

From small beginnings, our editorial relationship has developed. Each of us came to the task from our unique, perhaps idiosyncratic, world views and experience. As co-editors, 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.

Steve writes:

I have been pleasantly surprised by the combination of similarity and difference that we have brought to our editorial collaboration. My initial thoughts, expressed to Bob, that I brought no experience at all to the task, was met with Bob's gently challenging riposte "I don't think that is quite true, is it Steve?" This response woke me up and enabled me to get on with our joint work.

I have seen how our styles have been different throughout the process. Each of us has been content that our complementary perspectives might help the writers most effectively. I hope that this twin approach has supported the end result.

Bob writes:

I was first drawn to Steve by his robust vulnerability, empathy and humour, as well as by a shared sense of existential pain. I knew immediately that I could trust Steve, that he was an accomplished facilitator, and that, should any issues arise between us, we could sort them out openly and honestly. There seemed to me to be a kind of mutual recognition.

I remember once when everything seemed to be going wrong. My computer kept on crashing, my inner critic was working overtime, and I felt that I was falling behind schedule. Steve's calm and reassuring voice at the other end of the 'phone gently calmed me down. After a break, I was able to return to editing, better rested and therefore probably more useful to authors - and to Steve. Turn-taking between us was a sine qua non. Sometimes, one of us was more readily available than the other, but we always knew that the other would be a reliable resource as soon as they were able.

Before Workshop 2, neither of us co-editors had ever before co-facilitated with each other in ways that are typically understood (although perhaps there's a sense in which we'd been co-facilitating almost from the outset. But that's another story). However, before too long, we came to appreciate and agree on several principles and approaches.

Reflections on the experience

One was a discovery that we both readily embraced the term 'scholarly practitioner' (e.g. [Miller 2013](#)) in describing an aspect of our respective professional identities. Another was a shared desire to facilitate awareness of the significant contribution that writing and speaking, interacting, can make to our understanding of the theory and practice of facilitating and experiencing facilitation, as well as of writing. And yet another was that we liked, and were enriched by, each other's style and personality, which we came to

feel was complementary and would be of service to each other and to other stakeholders in this writing project. Perhaps by instinct, we tended to adopt a different form of offering feedback on drafts: Steve's would generally be high level and insightful; Bob would tend to use Track Changes to locate specific observations *in situ*. Unless there was a particular urgency, we would exchange our proposed feedback to authors with each other first before sharing it with them. We also made a conscious choice not to replicate each other's approach, but rather to offer authors our different perspectives, as well as a choice about whether to take or leave any of our comments as they saw fit. Thus such individual differences of approach became 'our way'.

Complexities encountered and overcome

Of course, there can be a dark side to co-editing (and by extension, to co-facilitation). It can sometimes be more complex than going solo. On occasions, we found that we had made assumptions about what each other had or had not done, or who we had or had not contacted, and hence sometimes placed an extra burden on the other to catch what we had let go. Set against this was a warm feeling of reciprocal support and understanding during a protracted process that at times could feel pressurised and lonely. We liked and trusted each other, readily engaged in baton-passing, and were fully prepared to step in to the breach when the other was not available due to pressure of other engagements (guest-editing on *e-O&P* is not a full-time job – at least, not officially!). Messages sent to other people quickly and imperceptibly became and came from 'we' rather than 'I'.

These insights brought to mind a visual metaphor of rehearsing a script-reading for a theatrical performance.



[A cabaret rehearsal](#). pixabay.

Facilitation as rehearsal?

It seems to us that facilitation is experienced and expressed both privately and publicly, implicitly and explicitly, internally and overtly, and it's no surprise that these intertwined strands are intricately woven into

the articles that you'll find in this edition. Rehearsal is a preparation for going public in front of an audience, for honing one's skills and for gaining confidence; it holds out the prospect of some kind of performance on a stage, and of practice, anticipation, execution and feedback.

Staged performances come in various guises and genres, perhaps most extravagantly and subversively in the form of satirical cabaret, such as that associated with Toulouse Lautrec, the Moulin Rouge in the time of La Belle Époque in France, or in the Weimar Republic after World War 1.

Although the tenor of Sally Bowles' [number](#) in the 1972 film 'Cabaret' is hedonistic and subversive, that of facilitation is generally less ebullient and raunchy. However, there may be some parallels, including almost always its framing via an authored script – either written or embodied. The following image shows a group of facilitators with their scripts, rehearsing a performance. It offers another rich visual metaphor to suggest ideas about playing roles, performance, scripting (writing), dialogue (speaking), groups, authoring, 'directing', genre variety, audiences, improvisation, casting, environment etc, all of which are constituent aspects of facilitation.



Working with scripts: The Annual AMED Writing Workshop, Brighton, 2016: [Trust, writing and conversations](#)
(photo credit: Bob MacKenzie)

An overview of the articles in this edition

The articles in this edition are all drawn from the real life experience of the writers as *facilitators*. From this common ground has sprung a wide range of perspectives.

[Tony Page](#) recounts his first steps into facilitation, recognising his limitations at that formative time. He then takes us through some of his professional journey, and focuses on the usefulness of writing as a learning tool for both facilitators and for others experiencing facilitation. The ways in which solid theory grounds his own practice of writing, and of facilitation, are very clear. Reflecting on his own experience, he makes a persuasive case for all facilitators to commit to regular professional supervision, in which writing can play a seminal role.

[Khorshed Bhote](#) draws from her experience as a teacher, learner and as a facilitator. The picture that she develops, of learning that leads to a feeling of empowerment, is vivid. Her way of writing transports the reader to the places and times that she describes. This personal prose is underpinned by her sound understanding and application of theories of learning. Khorshed's conclusions - that we need to reflect, develop our toolbox and commit to lifelong learning - provide valuable nuggets of good advice.

As a professional facilitator, [Rowena Davis](#) focuses in particular on her own experience of being facilitated. She deconstructs her own impressions and skilfully supports the method she has adopted by introducing and explaining System-Centred® theory. We are left with not only a deep and illuminating reflection on what it is to be facilitated, but also with a sound method to enable us to emulate her work.

[Shelagh Doonan](#) takes us on a series of adventures through her landscape of facilitation, traversing both how she came to practise her own facilitation style, and how it feels to be facilitated. She uses several personal experiences to illustrate the development of her appreciation of catalysts to conversations, and shows how conversations are themselves catalysts to learning and change. Her loves and frustrations occasioned by facilitation provide acute personal insights into what is and what is not facilitation.

[Alice Fox and Alison Donaldson](#) show us some of the delights and special needs of co-facilitation. Their collaboration crosses boundaries of location, language and method. Drawing upon two different settings in the Far East, they demonstrate the usefulness of being playful and creative, and signpost ways in which their approach can be replicated across diverse organisational settings.

[Louise Austin](#) takes a profound look into the existence and challenges of counter-transference in the facilitator. Her exposure of her own inner 'wounded facilitator' invites all of us who take on this role to acknowledge, welcome and use the images that emerge from within ourselves. Her encouragement to pay close attention to the metaphors that are suggested by our internal reflections offer sustaining nourishment for us facilitators and for the groups that we work with.

[Roger Noon](#) compares and contrasts the concept of presence within 1:1 coaching and 1:group facilitation contexts. Drawing on his own recent research and on that of one of the co-editors of this edition (Steve) he offers a conceptual map that synthesises knowledge across individual and group work. He invites readers to contribute to continuing research that aims at generating a wide map of human experience. The importance of relationship in our work clearly includes all participants, and presence can therefore be seen as a central principle of working with others.

[Steve Dilworth](#) offers glimpses of his own pathway into and through facilitation. His article explores the sense of distress that facilitators can feel, and urges us to find ways to manage and use any strong feelings we may experience in service of the groups we are working with. By exposing the elements of his own 'facilitator signature', he hopes that readers will recognise, honour and develop their own.

Finally, [Paul Levy](#) contributes a favourable book review on 'Beyond Genuine Stupidity. Ensuring AI Serves Humanity', which concerns the impact of artificial intelligence. His article on an exploration of physical and digital writing about facilitation will appear in the Summer 2018 edition of e-O&P.

Envoi

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, thinking and feelings about facilitation 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 wrote earlier, as co-editors, we have 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 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 we at *e-O&P* are 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 **AWG** 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.

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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.

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