Sharing experiences of facilitation through writing

Part 1

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Presence in facilitation and executive coaching: same view; two windows?

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Facilitators and coaches alike view presence as an important factor in effective practice yet it is a nebulous and under researched concept. With reference to two recent studies of this phenomenon in executive coaching and facilitation, this article explores its nature and dynamics in one-to-one and group dialogue. By comparing and contrasting the constructs of presence that have emerged from these two differing contexts, it concludes that the emerging concepts are very similar suggesting there is scope for further inquiry to generate a more universal ‘map’ of human experience.

Keywords
presence, executive coaching, facilitation, AMED Writers’ Group, conceptual encounter, autoethnography

My emerging appreciation of Presence

Over the past few years that I have spent working as a facilitator and executive coach, I have developed a curiosity about the similarities and differences between the two disciplines. This is connected with a basic motivation to become a more effective professional in both of these fields and a commitment to reflexive practice as an important discipline supporting my professional development. I have noticed for instance, that some coach and facilitation sessions or periods within a session seem to flow better than others. There seem to be similar facilitator/coach characteristics that are involved in a successful session and some common relational qualities that emerge between me and my coaching clients or facilitation participants. One of the qualities that I have come to see as foundational is presence.

As a coach, I have observed the many flashes of insight in clients where issues seem to resolve without any obvious intervention from me. I have watched as clarity has suddenly emerged from apparent messy confusion and a transformational experience has followed. I have also worked with clients as they have moved through more incremental changes that edge towards a (hopefully) satisfying conclusion. I have often wondered what underlying, unconscious processes are at work that help us collaborate together in this kind of dialogue, why these flashes of insight occur at a particular time, and how they might become more commonplace. Sometimes I have felt heavily involved in this change process and sometimes I have been more of an apparent bystander or observer as progress is made with me simply being in the room. As I noticed the depth of connection with my clients develop, I associated it with a felt sense of presence between us. I had at this time a fairly vague idea of what presence meant to me and I recognised tacit experiences...
that I couldn’t express in immediately available language. I wanted to explore this in more depth. I was also curious about my clients' perspective, whether they also experienced presence and if so, how our being present together affected each other during our conversation.

As a facilitator, during group conversations, I have recognised similar experiences that I associated with presence. For instance, in a recent facilitated dialogue between a senior leadership team and Board, as I listened to the participants discuss what it was about the organisation’s purpose that united them, I felt a wave of compassion and warmth towards them. I could feel their authenticity and the belief they had in the value of what they were doing. I felt an internal calmness, where I wasn’t trying to think too hard, make judgements or jump to conclusions: I was just there to receive and witness. It felt as though questions or reflections emerged from within me without prior thought and that the group received them as being perceptive and helpful. I felt present and available to whatever was about to come and without a need to be in control. On reflection, I felt connected to myself, to my presence.

This sense of presence has developed slowly over years of working with individuals and groups. It has emerged as much through reflective learning from engagements that have challenged me as those times when I have felt the glow of success. One of the biggest changes in the more present ‘me’ is that I seem to spend less time ‘in my head’, trying to plan group activities to fine detail whilst feeling responsible to work things out on behalf of my clients or contribute some amazing insight. Instead, I am simply being present with the group. I have found that this attitude is reciprocated creating a rich communication that is very different to many of the other work-based conversations they have.

A meeting of Presence

Fast forwarding to now and having just completed a doctoral research study into the concept of presence in executive coaching, I have developed a much deeper understanding of the phenomenon in a very specific professional context. Building on this learning, I am now asking myself: “How applicable is this executive coaching-based concept of presence to other related contexts?” A view with respect to facilitation recently arrived through a chance meeting with Steve Dilworth at a meeting of the AMED Writers’ Group. Entirely by coincidence, I discovered that Steve had investigated presence in the context of facilitation for his doctoral research (Dilworth, 2008). He used an autoethnographical approach and reading his work shed light on the question I was asking myself as his findings showed some interesting similarities to the executive coaching context. For instance, Steve described himself being at his best as a facilitator when,

“my presence or attention is entirely focused on the group or individual I am there to facilitate, and I maintain vigilance regarding what is happening within my own psychological, emotional and physical being.

(p.100)

This echoed similar sentiments that emerged with respect to executive coaching, such as:

“a highly developed awareness of and sensitivity to the here-and-now, as well as a deep level of absorption, or presence to, an inwardly experienced process. As such, it is constituted by a set of qualities, such as feeling a sense of heightened mental, emotional and somatic awareness, a sense of being in-the-moment, and a sense of timelessness.”

(Noon, 2017, p.143)
This similarity led me to look more closely at the comparison between Steve’s facilitation-based findings and my executive coaching study. My intention here is to bring the two conceptualisations together in an attempt to broaden and extend our understanding of presence in both contexts. I have (tentatively) summarised some of Steve’s key insights and contrasted them with the conceptual model that emerged within an executive coaching context. As a result, I suggest there is value in knowledge transfer between the two contexts whilst acknowledging the significant contextual differences. One of the main differences for instance, is that facilitative environments involve more complex group dynamics that unfold in different ways to one-to-one coaching encounters, where the focus is on just one person.

Facilitation and executive coaching contexts compared: two studies
The two studies use different, yet complementary approaches for their investigations. The methodologies and the findings that emerged are discussed below.

Conceptual encounter inquiry in the executive coaching context
The executive coaching study used the methodology of ‘conceptual encounter’ (De Rivera, 1981) which investigates the experience of research partners via semi-structured interviews. The approach accentuates collaborative meaning-making between researcher and research partners and involves developing a conceptual model that evolves and matures as the interview process progresses. Its beauty is in interpreting people’s lived reality of presence as it ‘encounters’ an abstract, conceptual ‘map’. Like autoethnography, it acknowledges the subjective viewpoint of the researcher and both approaches are rooted in a phenomenological stance (i.e. attempting to understand people’s perceptions their experience from their perspective).

In the executive coaching research, two parallel conceptual encounters were performed, one investigating the client side, the other, the coach. In this way, both participants in the dialogue had an equal voice in the research. An outline is shown in figure 1 (below).

In step 1, an initial concept is derived from the researcher’s experience and a review of relevant literature. Following the left-hand (client) path, in step 2, the first half of the first client interview is focussed on the research partner recounting a detailed narrative of their experience of presence. In the second half, the concept is presented to them and then discussed in light of this experience. As a result of this discussion and subsequent data analysis, a modified map emerges (step 3) and this new version is used in the next interview.
This procedure is repeated for the six client interviews so that the map evolves each time in an iterative fashion, always including all of the experiences of the previous research participants (thematic abstraction is used to maintain inclusivity, so for example, if one person likes apples and another likes oranges, the level of abstraction that they have in common might be in liking round, coloured fruit). The same approach was followed for the coach interviews (the right-hand side of figure 1) with an overarching map emerging in step 4 that encompassed both perspectives. This final concept, referred to as the C² model (recognising the coach and client voices in the two "C's") is explained below and summarised in this short (3-minute) YouTube video: https://youtu.be/vPHjY_2VoWI.
In brief, presence is viewed as a way of being involving three facets of experience:

**Figure 2 – The Two Modes**

Firstly, with respect to two modes as shown in figure 2. Mode one concerns being more aware of the here-and-now whilst mode two involves being more absorbed by one’s experience. Mode 2 can be likened to the relational equivalent of the experience of ‘flow’; (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990), a state associated with ‘optimal performance’ where a person is totally absorbed and not aware of the here-and-now.

**Figure 3 – The Three Dimensions**

Secondly, with respect to three dimensions (figure 3). How it is experienced by someone internally (mentally, emotionally and somatically); how one’s presence is perceived externally by the other person; and how it is experienced relationally between client and coach.

**Figure 4 – Dynamics**

Thirdly (figure 4), articulating a structure of presence in terms of two modes and three dimensions allows the notion of poles of full presence and a lack of presence for each facet. This then accommodates a dynamic aspect to the phenomenon, as both client and coach move between the two poles (perhaps frequently) during their dialogue.

Finally, in addition to these two modes and three dimensions, the concept also encompasses conditions for presence as well as outcomes or effects.
Autoethnographic inquiry in the facilitation context

Steve used an autoethnographical approach as the basis for his study, which accentuates self as the focus of an inquiry. He was interested in his personal experience of facilitating and motivated by,

"exploring my experience as a facilitator and discovering what it is about presence that makes it a distinct phenomenon. I particularly wanted to learn how to be most present in my work"

(p.140).

He refers to a ‘kaleidoscope’ of characteristics that are associated with presence and which promote an effective facilitative space for participants through for instance, developing trust with the group and exuding a sense of calmness and confidence. He sees presence as a quality that can be developed through practice.
and experience, which is closely linked to a person’s authenticity reflected for instance in their ethical stance. Presence involves a commitment to self-reflection and increasing self-awareness through a variety of practices including writing, feedback from self and others, and supervision. In his experience Steve feels that,

> “the ability to reflect into…my work and using it as I do in the act of facilitating, brings an enhanced quality of practice that I now believe to be of crucial importance in the development of presence.”

He suggests that, “one needs to commit to the work of increasing self-awareness in order to be an effective facilitator”. He also sees presence expressed through an ability for a facilitator to ask good questions:

> “In the act of facilitating I have noticed that the more I can discover and utilise great questions - rather than attempting to provide great answers - the more effective my facilitation becomes.”

The C² model outlines two modalities which were presented earlier. The ‘more absorbed’ mode can be likened to the relational equivalent of the experience of ‘flow’; (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990), a state of consciousness associated with ‘optimal performance’ where a person is totally absorbed in an experience and not aware necessarily of the here-and-now or of their self. Coaches and clients reported that they knew they had been in this mode of presence only once they had emerged from it and Steve’s findings articulate a similar notion beautifully when he states:

> “It seems unlikely that one can simply decide to be present. In fact, any attempt to consciously do so may prevent such ability and I have a tongue in cheek image of frantically drawing attention to myself as I am working with a group, waving and saying, ‘Look! Here I am, being present!’”

This chimes well with an insight from one of the executive coaching research participants who stated,

> “when you’re really fully present, you’re completely unaware of whether you’re present or not. It’s not a conscious thing.”

Dynamics of presence are also reflected in Steve’s facilitation experience where he reports a struggle between self-awareness and self-consciousness. He also reports instances when he is more present than others and acknowledges that he finds it,

> “relatively easy to locate and sustain my presence with individuals and increasingly difficult as groups get bigger.”

Finally, Steve refers to a relational aspect of his experience of presence in facilitation. This is conceived in the C² model as the mutual experience of being with the other person whilst holding a person-centred attitude and again there is a close similarity in Steve’s observation that,

> “in recognising the importance of relationship I particularly note that presence moves beyond being there and into being there with the person(s) facilitated.”

I have formalised a comparison of this concept of facilitator presence with the C² model in Figure 6, which shows a mapping of some these key themes. It is striking how similar the terrain is.
Whilst performing this exercise, I wondered whether an appreciation of presence in facilitation could be extended through the inclusion of the participants’ perspectives, echoing the client side of the conceptual encounter. This might help to broaden our focus from the presence of the facilitator towards or with the group to presence experienced between all of the participants involved in the dialogue. Since the findings from both studies emphasise the relational aspects of presence, the inclusion of this ‘participant presence’ seems to have value and suggests a more sophisticated, systemic construct where each person’s presence in the group is dynamically affecting everybody else’s and crucially, affecting the effectiveness and success of the overall engagement. In the executive coaching study, the interplay between client and coach was described as a kind of relational ‘dance’. In facilitation, the dance seems more complex.

**Conclusion: the same view – different windows?**

These experiences of presence in facilitation and executive coaching offer helpful insights into practice in both areas. Whilst the two studies have used different methodologies and researched different contexts, it feels as if they are both looking at the same view, just from different windows. It seems to me that useful knowledge can indeed be transferred between coaching and facilitation for the benefit of both. By using this article to synthesise this knowledge, a broader understanding has emerged. My own experience is that I can apply this learning more widely to most of the dialogic situations I can think of in both personal and professional life. This reinforces my conviction, shared by Steve, that presence is a way of being and that

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**Table: C² Model with Presence in Facilitation**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>C² Model (Conceptual Encounter)</th>
<th>Mapping Aspects of Facilitation Presence (Autoethnography)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>State of being</strong></td>
<td>- &quot;I see presence as a state of being rather than a stage of development&quot;</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- Connection with the transpersonal</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Medial - More Aware vs More Absorbed</strong></td>
<td>- Self-awareness</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- Being in flow (&quot;When I am in flow, this balance just works&quot;)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- Being in the zone or the flow as if the ability to facilitate arises from within, or possibly unbidden from outside oneself</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Internal Dimension</strong></td>
<td>- &quot;I maintain vigilance regarding what is happening within my own psychological, emotional and physical being&quot;</td>
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<td>- Ability to ask good questions and disclose internal state when appropriate</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- Awareness of a lack of presence due to distraction of the inner world (e.g. internal chatter, the inner critic) and dealing with emotions (anxiety / excitement)</td>
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<td><strong>Relational Dimension</strong></td>
<td>- &quot;In recognising the importance of relationship I particularly note that presence moves beyond being there and into being there with the person(s) facilitated.&quot;</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- Not judging, not anticipating concerns</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- &quot;When I am at my best my presence, or attention is focused on the group or individual&quot;</td>
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<td><strong>External Dimension</strong></td>
<td>- &quot;An ability to portray an appearance of neutrality&quot;</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Dynamics</strong></td>
<td>- Dynamic struggle between self-awareness and self-consciousness</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- &quot;I was focused in my task of discovering what is essential about facilitation that would enable me to be more present and then most present.&quot;</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Conditions</strong></td>
<td>- Authenticity reflected for instance in their ethical stance</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- Notion of ethical presence</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Practice and Experience</strong></td>
<td>- Presence can be cultivated by committing to increasing self-awareness (e.g. through self-reflection, writing, feedback and supervision)</td>
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<td><strong>Conducive Environment</strong></td>
<td>- &quot;One of the problems I have found when I am attempting to deliberately facilitate from an authentic state of presence is that I become (at times) acutely aware of disturbances to that sense of presence.&quot;</td>
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<td><strong>In-Session Interventions</strong></td>
<td>- &quot;It is certainly possible to create the best conditions in which presence may be cultivated and therefore more likely to occur and be experienced.&quot;</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Enabling</strong></td>
<td>- Connection between presence and witnessing: &quot;I have frequently wondered what people being facilitated really value in the facilitator. A colleague recently summarised this as needing a witness: she suggested that people value the experience of being heard.&quot;</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Utility</strong></td>
<td>- Being a more effective facilitator</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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**Figure 6 – Contrasting the C² Model with Presence in Facilitation**
whilst it has been explored in two very specific areas, it is relevant in all dialogue. Perhaps there is a need for further research that aims to generate a more universal concept by encompassing a wider ‘map’ of human experience.

**Postscript - The Learning Journey**

As I reflect on my learning about presence through researching and writing this article it feels as if there has been a kind of ongoing metamorphosis in my awareness. The first stage began almost without me being aware of it. As I went about my professional practice, a dim, tacit sense of the effects of this fascinating concept developed that gradually crystallised as a strong need to understand more. Something intrigued me about the qualities involved in the professional process of listening deeply with heart and head to another person, where the deeper interaction between us was taking place beneath the words. This led to a second stage which involved professional research to express in words this knowledge that lay outside the conscious awareness of my research participants and myself. Together, we were trying to shine a light on, and make sense of, complex feelings and interactions that we associated with this idea we called presence. The third stage has involved the learning experience where knowledge from two contexts would meet, intermingle and affect each other. This was my experience when looking through the windows of coaching and facilitation as Steve’s work enriched the landscape for me. It has been an inspiring experience. As a result my perspective has broadened again and I have begun to see presence everywhere in all of the dialogues I observe and participate in. I am most interested in what you, the reader, make of this fascinating concept given that you are also now a co-researcher in this narrative. Perhaps we are about to embark on a fourth stage.

**References**


**About Roger**

Roger is an executive coach and independent change management consultant currently involved in culture change and conduct & ethics work in the banking sector. He holds a Masters in Executive Coaching from Ashridge Business School and a Doctorate in Coaching and Mentoring from Oxford-Brookes University. He is also a student of tai chi.

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