

Guide to facilitation

Guide

Vitae resources: developing the
skills and careers of researchers

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Introduction

Welcome to the 'Guide to Facilitation'. This is a resource for anyone who would like to find out more about the **facilitation of learning**, and the knowledge and skills that can help with this. As a trainer, supervisor, facilitator, or someone responsible for learning and development, you may find this guide of use if you are looking to develop different approaches to encourage learning and development, whether it be in an individual or group context.

The information in this guide is based on the premise that teaching is not about imparting knowledge and prescribing things to students, but it is about the **facilitation of the self-directed learner**. How people learn, and how to bring about this learning process, is the focus of discussion, rather than how to teach things to people.

The information is laid out under the following headings:

What is facilitation?

This section focuses on different styles of facilitation: directive, co-operative and autonomous and suggests how to integrate these to form your own approach to facilitation.

How do people learn?

The importance of David Kolb's Learning Cycle and Drs Honey and Mumford's Learning Styles are examined in this section. It looks at the practical implications of these theories in developing an approach to facilitation.

Tools to help facilitating learning within groups

The focus of this section is on facilitating groups, considering how groups form, evolve and function. It outlines several theories to help with understanding group development and behaviour: these include looking at containment and connections, understanding the stages of group development and dynamics of group decision making.

Practical facilitation tools

This section includes some reminders and tips for improving fundamental skills: active listening, questioning, giving and receiving feedback. There is practical advice on how to deal with difficult group dynamics and it concludes with a reference section on available resources.

Top tips: the experiences of one facilitator ...

One facilitator suggests an integrated approach and some practical advice to develop your facilitation style.

What is facilitation?

Facilitation is often considered with reference to leading or managing groups, typically in a workshop context. When it comes to **group** facilitation, the following offers a useful definition:

“... the facilitator’s role is much more about **opening things up for discussion** in a stimulating way, getting ideas into the open and helping the group to listen to each other, further its knowledge and thus make informed decisions ...”

Cameron, E. (2001), “Facilitation Made Easy”, Kogan Page Business Books; 2nd edition

However, facilitation as an approach is not exclusive to managing groups. If we take as its meaning that to facilitate is **to help something become easier for someone else**, then as a trainer/supervisor/tutor/lecturer, what you do is to help the process of learning and development become easier for a group or an individual. In this context, “... opening things up for discussion ... getting ideas into the open ...” (ibid) and helping individuals make their own decisions, is very much what you would do when working with learners. When facilitating in a learning context, your role is not that of teacher, where you are the all knowing authority, responsible for student learning. As a facilitator, you do not take centre-stage, the focus is on the learners. Your role is secondary, and one whereby you provide the right environment and conditions for learning to take place. The responsibility of learning lies primarily with the self-directed learner. The facilitator role is that of **empowering individuals to learn**.

Styles of facilitation

There are three main facilitation styles, each of which is appropriate for different individual or group situations. You are likely to have a preference for one style over the other, but it is important to recognise that each style is useful for different contexts, and for different individuals. As such, you should make a conscious decision to use the style which is most appropriate for any given situation:

- **Directive:** you direct the learning process and do things for the group or the individual. As facilitator, you decide on what will be managed and how things will be managed. You take responsibility for all the major decisions, and for the processes and direction of the learning.
- **Co-operative:** you collaborate with the group or the individual in devising the learning process. As facilitator, you share power/control and guide them towards becoming more self-directing by conferring with them. Together you would negotiate the outcomes, and whilst you would share your views, these would become one of many to be considered collectively.
- **Autonomous:** you respect the autonomy of the group or the individual, and give them freedom to find their own way, using their own judgement, without any intervention on your part. Learning becomes totally self-directed and unprompted. This does not mean you abdicate responsibility, but it is a subtle approach where you give space so that the group or the individual can determine their own learning.

For further information on this, see John Heron, ‘The Complete Facilitator’s Handbook’. Heron is a respected expert in the field of facilitation and has published extensively on its theory and practice.

Tips on how to use the different styles

All styles can be appropriate and useful for different group and individual situations. Generally speaking, **the greater autonomy** you can give any individual or group in what and how they learn, **the better it is** for their learning and self-determination. Practically, however, people expect some sort of guidance from a facilitator, and will look to you to give it.

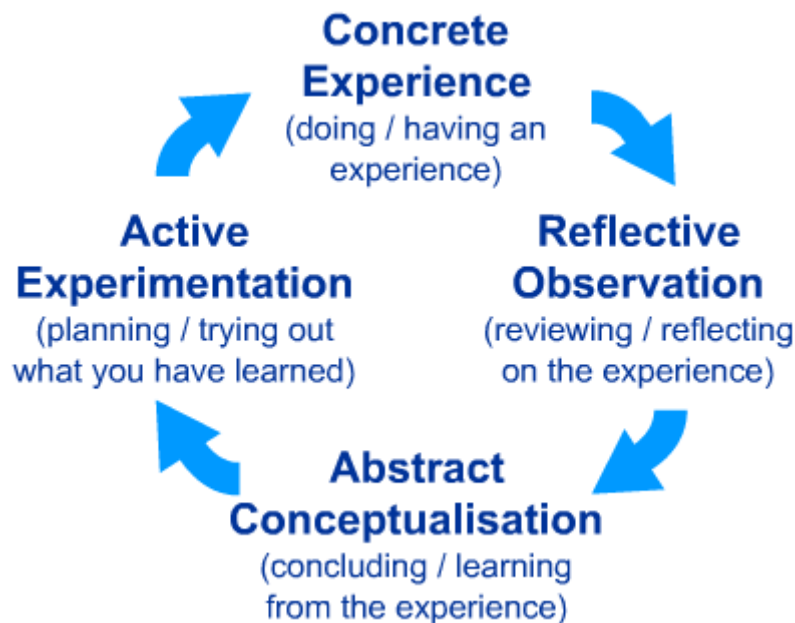
Given this, it is advisable to **begin with a directive style**, and then gently **ease the individual or group towards greater autonomy** through processes of gradually giving up power and control. Depending on the group or individual, you may never reach autonomy, but having it as a goal, can be a useful way to help keep you focused on the fact that the responsibility of learning lies primarily with the self-directed learner.

How do people learn?

When facilitating groups, or working with individuals, it is helpful to have an understanding of how people learn, so that you can seek to accommodate the different preferred approaches.

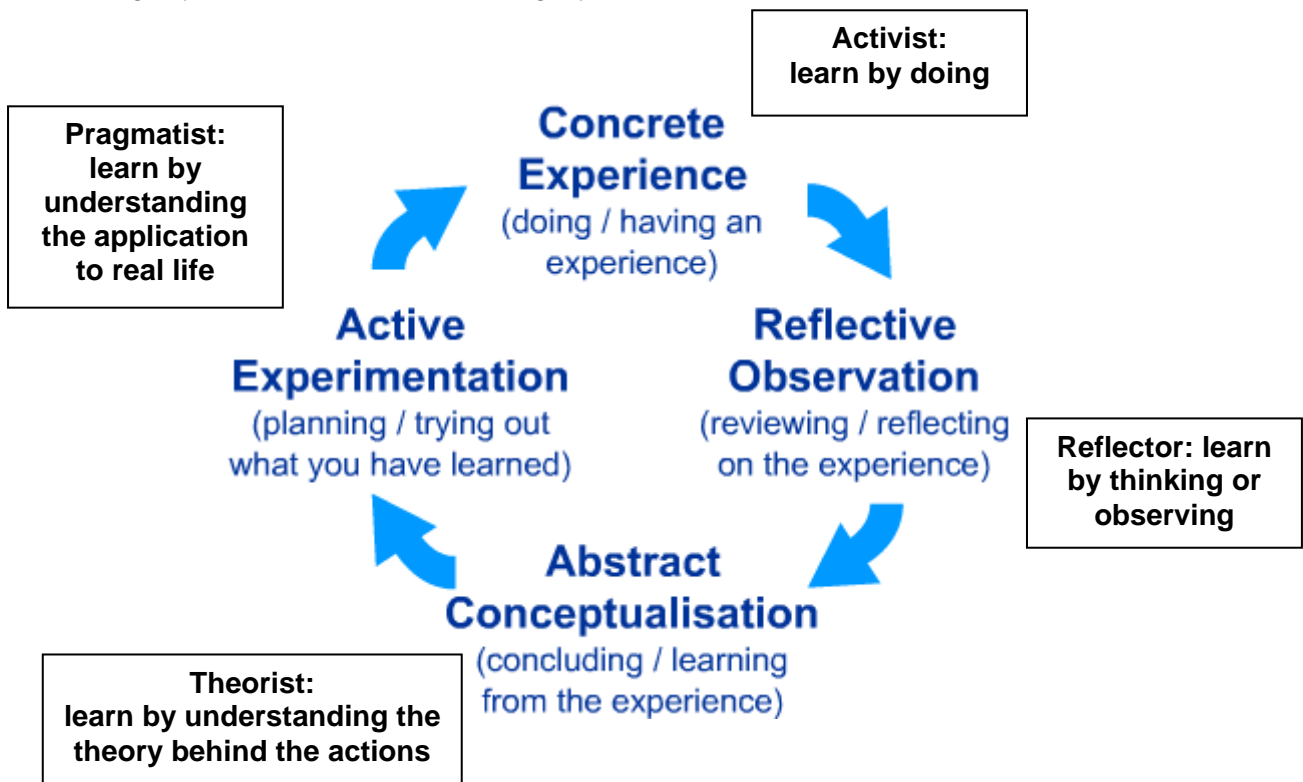
The Learning Cycle and Learning Styles

The following (from David Kolb's work 'Experiential Learning') presents a useful theory on how people learn:



The theory says that ideally this process represents a learning cycle or spiral where the learner goes through all the stages as part of a cycle. Typically, we have an experience, which we then think about and reflect upon (be it consciously or less consciously); we then make conclusions from these reflections; these conclusions in turn lead us to plan what to do next time, this in turn leading onto other experiences, and so on.

This Learning Cycle model was taken further by psychologists, Drs Honey and Mumford, who suggested that we all have preferred Learning Styles. They identified the following Learning Styles, relative to the Learning Cycle:



- **Activists** learn by doing. They like to get stuck in, have a go, get their hands dirty and see what happens.
- **Reflectors** learn by observing and thinking about what happened. They like to stand back and observe from the sidelines.
- **Theorists** like to understand the theory behind the actions. They need models, concepts and facts to engage in the learning process.
- **Pragmatists** need to know how the learning can be applied in the real world. Ideas are of interest only if they can see how they can put them into practice in their lives.

Implications of different learning styles for you as a facilitator

The first step for any of us working as facilitators of learning is **to understand our own learning style**. This is very important, as typically we tend to be biased towards it, and we can value learning approaches that honour our preference, often paying less attention to, or even ignoring, other styles.

Based on this short introduction to the theory, you may already have an appreciation of your own preference. However, if you feel unclear about your preferred style(s) and wish to seek further clarity on this, Honey and Mumford have developed a questionnaire to help identify your learning style. There are many websites which offer to analyse your learning style; if you type 'Honey and Mumford Learning Styles' into any internet search engine, you will be able to select an appropriate website to help you.

Although the theory suggests that different people naturally prefer a certain single different learning style, it also states that **everyone needs the stimulus of all types of styles**. Given this, when facilitating any learning event, it can be useful to look at all the activities and check that they cater for all learning preference and styles. As you work with a group or an

individual over time, you can begin to pick up on their learning preferences, and then adapt your approach accordingly.

To help you understand how to use this theory in practice, the following section suggests different learning approaches to suit different learning styles. These may help you formulate your own learning events or activities with individuals or groups:

Activists: activists learn best from learning approaches where:

- They are thrown in at the deep end
- There are new experiences/problems/opportunities from which to learn
- They are allowed to generate ideas without constraints
- They are working with other people, solving problems as part of a team
- There is excitement/drama/crisis and things chop and change with many different things to manage
- They have a lot of visibility, where they can lead discussions, or give presentations, for example

Reflectors: reflectors learn best from learning approaches where:

- They are able to stand back from events and listen and watch, for example, attending a lecture, watching an experiment
- They are asked to produce carefully considered analysis and reports
- They are given the time to ponder events, and to think before acting or commenting
- They can carry out painstaking research
- They have the opportunity to review what has happened and what they have learned, without necessarily having to share this with others
- They can reach a decision in their own time without pressure and tight deadlines

Theorists: theorists learn best from learning approaches where:

- What is being offered is part of a system, model, concept, or theory
- They have time to explore methodically the associations and relationships between events and situations
- They have the chance to question and probe basic methodology, assumptions or logic behind something
- They are intellectually stretched, for example, being tested in a tutorial session
- They are in a structured learning environment with a clear purpose
- They can listen to or read about ideas and concepts that emphasise rationality or logic
- They are offered interesting ideas and concepts even though they are not immediately relevant

Pragmatists: pragmatists learn best from learning approaches where:

- They are shown techniques for doing things with an obvious practical advantage, for example, how to save time, how to present your research, how to get a paper accepted etc.
- They have the chance to try out and practise techniques with a credible expert
- They are given techniques currently applicable to their own job
- They are given immediate opportunities to implement what they have learned
- They can concentrate on practical issues, such as drawing up action plans, working on real presentations they are to give, planning their time to manage their research, for example

Tools to help facilitating learning within groups

If most of your time is spent in 1:1 learning situations, then this section of the guide will be of less relevance to you, as it focuses on facilitating learning in a group context. The following section outlines some theories on group behaviour and development to help you manage the learning process more effectively:

- Containment and connections
- Stages of group development
- Dynamics of group decision-making

Containment and connections are two vital factors in the facilitation of groups. At the outset **how you manage the involvement of the individuals, and their involvement with the task**, is crucial. Work by an experienced academic in this field, Dr Martin Ringer, suggests that it is worth recognising two things which you, as a facilitator, need to do:

Containment – “...adequate containment refers to group members having the conscious and unconscious sense of being firmly held in the group and its task ...”
Ringer, M (2002) Group Action, Jessica Kingsley Publishers, London and Philadelphia, p190

Ringer suggests that this sense of containment is vital in all groups, and that if it exists, it will help group members manage the anxiety that results from being in the group, and provide some of the structures that allow individuals to feel safe within the group.

Early on, you have an active role in constructing this sense of containment. The sorts of things you may do to engender this are:

- Starting off by sharing the task and objectives of the group
- Discussing individuals' objectives
- Sharing an understanding of roles, tasks and expectations within the group
- Setting and agreeing time limits – start and end times, with break times
- Setting and agreeing the rules for confidentiality about what occurs within the group

Containment is a process that you may feel you handle sub-consciously, as the actual 'things to do' to make it happen are common practice. However it can be useful to think about it more consciously at the start, as it is something that you need to facilitate initially, to allow the group to move on and manage this sense of containment themselves.

Connections – “...a group is more than just a number of people who happen to be in one place at one time ... One key characteristic of groups is the *interconnection between members and their common connection with a leader and a task ...*”
Ringer, M (2002) Group Action, Jessica Kingsley Publishers, London and Philadelphia, p198

Ringer considers these connections as being key to effective group working. In practical terms this means managing all the connections between individuals and the task, individuals and each other, and between individuals and you. The following examples illustrate what this means in practice:

- **Connect yourself to the task** – by explaining your background and experience in the subject in hand
- **Connect individuals to the task** – by discussing why it is important, for them as researchers, to know how to give good presentations, for example

- **Connect individuals to each other** – feeling safe in a group (and therefore enabling individuals to develop most effectively) is about feeling that there are other people in the group who will be supportive and friendly. Introducing some sort of activity, where individuals work in pairs, or have a brief 1:1 conversation with everyone else in the group, is one way to connect individuals with each other.

These are only some of the connections Ringer talks about, but they are enough to start out with. It is about thinking, “what needs to be done to get these people involved in the group, and to feel comfortable about working within it, and what connections can I make for them to facilitate this?”

However you want to label the concepts of containment and connections, they are processes which, as a facilitator, you need to help bring about at the beginning, to encourage the effective involvement and working of a group of people. For further reading on this, see Dr Martin Ringer’s book on ‘Group Action’.

Stages of group development

When working with groups it can be helpful to have an **understanding of how groups form, evolve and function**, as the group’s evolution and dynamics will impact on each individual’s learning and development.

There is a lot of theory around group development. One useful, well-known model was first described in 1965 by Bruce Tuckman, who observed the four different stages that groups go through to achieve effectiveness. This model talks about the four stages of **Forming, Storming, Norming** and **Performing**. The words themselves indicate what each stage involves. For reference there are numerous webpages devoted to the subject.

Another useful model, particularly in the context of learning, comes from John Heron’s book ‘The Complete Facilitator’s Handbook’. Heron describes the group stages as the four seasons³:

- Wintertime – the ground may be frozen, and the weather stormy. This is usually at the beginning of a group coming together. Trust is low, individuals are guarded. This, Heron calls the **Stage of defensiveness**.
- Springtime – new life starts to break through. The group is now underway, trust is building, defences are coming down, work is happening. This Heron calls the **Stage of working through defensiveness**.
- Summertime – there is an abundance of growth and the sun is high. Trust is high, there is openness, risk-taking, caring and sharing; people are becoming authentic, expressive, and work is well underway. This Heron calls the **Stage of authentic behaviour**.
- Autumn – the fruit is harvested and stored, and the harvesters give thanks and go on their way. As the group draws to a close, members come together and review their progress, and their learning, and prepare to transfer it to their life outside the group. This Heron calls the **Stage of closure**.

Heron, J (1999), The Complete Facilitator’s Handbook, Kogan Page Ltd., London, p. 51-2

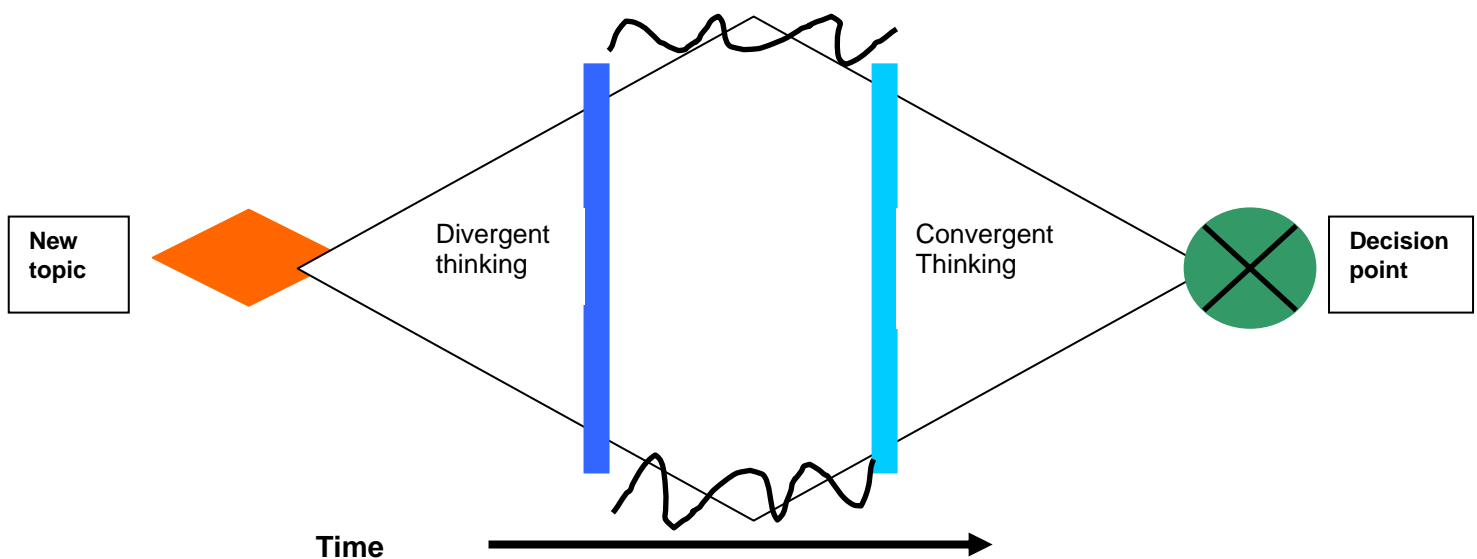
This model is useful for a learning context, as it describes group development with a metaphor that relates to growth and maturing, which are key goals for any of us working in education, training and development.

Both Tuckman and Heron’s models can be helpful tools for a facilitator, as they help us appreciate the dynamics of different group stages, and so prepare us for managing/facilitating these in ways that encourage personal learning and development.

They can also be useful models to share with a group, as individuals work and develop together.

Dynamics of group decision-making

Having an understanding of the dynamics of group decision-making can also be helpful when facilitating the learning process. If you have experience of facilitating groups, you will be aware that group decision-making is not a linear process, where a topic or task is raised, opinions voiced, and then a decision agreed. People become attached to their own ideas, go off on tangents and can waffle around the topic, often seeming to be irrelevant. The diagram below illustrates the typical group decision-making process.



The central area between divergent and convergent thinking relates to exploring possibilities and thinking broadly. It is about experiencing the pain of frustration, impatience, confusion. From here, convergent thinking will emerge, and finally a decision made.

This process is not easy to manage. Depending on your style of facilitation, you can either help direct the group towards this decision, or leave them to direct themselves.

The very recognition of this dynamic can, in itself, be a step forward as groups come to realise that they are not doing something wrong and that this is just part of the decision making process. In this respect, you may want to consider sharing this dynamic with your group at some stage.

Practical facilitation tools

There are some fundamental skills which you need to demonstrate as a facilitator. Typically these will be skills which you already use, but it is worthwhile revisiting basic principles, just to check that they are being adhered to in practice. These are useful skills to hone for either 1:1 learning situations, or group learning situations.

Active Listening

The following table summarises the sorts of behaviours associated with 'active listening'. You may want to consider what you already do well with regard to this skill, and what areas you could work on.

	ACTIVE LISTENING	
	Helpful	Unhelpful
V E R B A L	For example: “Hmms” Open questions Summarising/paraphrasing Checking back	For example: Interrupting Giving own views Inappropriate advice Talking too much
N O N - V E R B A L	For example: Nodding Smiling Eye contact Leaning forward Mirroring their body language	For example: No, or minimal, eye contact Leaning away Unsmiling Aggressive/defensive body language

Questioning

Asking questions is something we do all the time, and we may feel there is nothing new to learn here. However, asking the right question, at the right time, and in the right way, is a hard-won skill, and a very important one for facilitating learning. As much as possible, in a learning situation, we want **to be opening up the discussion**, and putting the onus of the discussion onto the learners. In this case, lots of open questions (who, what, how, where, when) delivered succinctly, without flannel and repetition, followed by silence is a great way to go. If possible, try to avoid the ‘why?’ question, eg why do you think that?, as this can sound aggressive – try to re-frame with a ‘what?’ or ‘how?’, eg how did you come to reach that conclusion?

When it comes to providing clarity or checking your comprehension of what someone has said, you can start to tie conversations down with closed questions which demand simple, short answers. A useful mnemonic to remind yourself, when checking understanding with someone, is **IHUS** – “I heard you say”. This, followed by a question for confirmation, “is that correct?”, is a useful tool in facilitation, as often, when people hear back what they have said, it can help clarify their thoughts further.

Giving feedback.

Giving feedback is an essential skill in the learning and development process. You may be giving feedback in a 1:1 environment, or you may be doing it within a group context. In a group context, you might want to encourage individuals to give feedback to each other.

One way to manage feedback is to introduce clear guidelines for giving and receiving feedback, and then ask participants to use these guidelines throughout the course. In a

group context, a useful process is to begin with the participant who has just performed – eg given a presentation on their research – and ask that participant to give themselves feedback, then ask for feedback from fellow participants, before finally giving your own feedback. As facilitator, it is your responsibility to ensure that feedback is given in a constructive way.

The following provides guidelines on how to give feedback constructively, which you may find useful to share with participants so they can practise this skill with each other:

- We can only give feedback from our **own** perspective. **Focus on what you see, rather than on what you believe.** Consider using the 'I' pronoun when giving feedback, rather than using generalised, judging statements. For example, “I noticed that I felt confused when reading your report ” rather than “your report was confusing”. Or, preface with ‘**for me ...**’.
- **Be specific rather than general**, so that an individual can learn from it and either do it again, or avoid doing it again. For example, “I noticed that you handled the questions with a lot of tact and diplomacy at the end of that presentation” rather than “I noticed you were tactful”.
- **Make it supportive, rather than threatening** and provide a balance between positive and negative comments - what works well, and what could be done differently. If in doubt, focus on the positives - we never receive enough positive feedback in our lives.
- **Use it to inform, not to advise.** Once you have informed, you can then work with the recipient in a coaching manner to help them move forward. For example “How can you use that research approach to even greater effect?” or “what can you do to manage this situation?” At times, it may be appropriate to **offer suggestions**, but where possible, avoid giving advice. Let the recipient own the feedback and decide how they will manage it.
- **Focus on behaviour that can be changed.** Avoid giving feedback on things which are a characteristic of the individual and which they cannot change.
- **Keep it simple** - don't overdo it. People can only process one or two bits of information at any one time.
- **Make it timely.** Give the feedback as close to the event as possible, don't save it up. If someone is ‘doing something right’, or ‘doing something wrong’, let them know close to the action, so they can do something about it.
- **Provide clear performance standards** - so that if you are giving feedback which requires some change in behaviour, the recipient is clear about what success looks like.

Useful techniques for giving feedback

Here is a useful way of wording feedback:

- “What I liked ...”
- “What I would like to see more or ...”

or you may like to consider using this mnemonic, BOOST:

- **Balanced:** include both good and constructive points.
- **Observed:** only give examples of what you have seen the person say or do.
- **Objective:** it should be factual and focus on actions, and not your feelings about the person.
- **Specific:** always use specific examples.
- **Timely:** it should be given as close to the event as possible.

You may also want to share **guidelines for receiving feedback**, with your group. Here are some useful pointers:

- **Listen:** don't justify yourself or be embarrassed. Listen to what is being said without interrupting.
- **Clarify:** ask for more information or specific examples if you would like them.
- **Analyse:** decide whether you agree with the comments made. If you do, you probably want to take some sort of action; if you disagree, you probably won't.
- **Respond:** all you need to say is "thank you".

Dealing with difficult group dynamics

There will be times when you will be faced with challenging situations, either from individuals or from the group. If you can learn to embrace these situations, and work with them, they can be powerful experiences for learning and growth. The following, taken from the "The Facilitator's Guide to Participatory Decision Making" by Sam Kaner, gives some typical challenges, with suggestions for how to deal with these.

Problem	Common Mistake	Effective Response
1. Highly vocal member dominates discussion	Trying to control this person – "excuse me xxx do you mind if I let someone else take a turn".	If one person is overparticipating everyone else is under-participating, so focus your efforts on the under-participants and encourage them to participate more. Ask: "How do the rest of you feel about this?" or break into smaller groups.
2. Fooling around in the midst of a discussion	Trying to organise by saying "ok, everyone, let's get refocused".	Aim for a break as soon as possible. People become undisciplined when they are overloaded or worn out. After a break it will be easier to re-focus.
3. Low participation by entire group	Low participation can create the impression that a lot is getting done quickly, so the facilitator assumes that things are going well and does nothing.	Change from large group open-discussion to something else, like idea listing, or working in smaller groups.
4. Two people constantly 'coming to blows' or having a personal battle	Focusing on two individuals and trying to resolve conflict. A lot of time can be wasted trying to resolve conflict between two people who have no intention of agreeing.	Reach out to other members and ask "who else has an opinion on this?" or "let's step back a bit – are there any other issues that need to be addressed". Remember- don't focus on the dominant minority, but on the passive majority.

5. One or two silent members in a group whose other members participate actively	"XXX, you haven't said anything yet. What's your view?" Can make the person feel put on the spot and so retreat further into silence.	Break into small groups, to allow the quieter members a greater chance of speaking up.
6. Minimal participation by members who don't feel involved/interested in the particular topic	Ignore it, and act as though silence means consent. Be thankful that they are not making trouble.	Look for an opportunity to have a discussion on "What's important to me about this topic?" Have people break into small groups to discuss. This gives everyone a chance to consider their own stake in the outcome of the discussion.
7. Quibbling about trivial issues/procedures	Lecture them about wasting time.	Have group step back from the content and talk about the process – ask them "what is really going on here?"
8. Someone becomes strident and repetitive	At lunch, talk behind the person's back. Confront the person during the break, and then be surprised when you see their anxiety go through the roof when you resume.	People repeat themselves because they don't feel heard. Summarise the person's point of view until s/he feels understood. Encourage participants to state the views of group members whose views are different from their own. People just want to feel heard, not necessarily that everyone must agree with them.

Finding practical facilitation tools that work for you

There are many useful tools and mechanisms to help develop your facilitation approach. The best way to build these up is to refer to books and websites for ideas and approaches that others have used. The following are useful resources:

- Facilitation Made Easy, Esther Cameron, Kogan Page
- Participatory Workshop, Robert Chambers, Earthscan
- The Complete Facilitator's Handbook, John Heron, Kogan Page
- The Inspirational Trainer, Paul Z Jackson, Kogan Page
- Freedom to Learn – Rogers and Freiburg, Prentice Hall
- Group Action, Martin Ringer, Jessica Kingsley
- Visit any of these websites, and you will find a whole host of information and ideas on facilitation, plus further links to other useful sites
 - www.wilderdom.com/games/
 - <http://reviewing.co.uk/>
 - kaizen-training.com/free/

Top Tips: the experiences of one facilitator ...

The amount of information available on how to facilitate in a learning context can appear overwhelming. Each of us will find our own way, which is likely to be constantly evolving as our experience grows. Here are a few tips:

- **Focus on the learners** – it is not about you, but them, and as far as possible, let them take the lead in how and what they learn.
- **Accommodate the different learning styles**, so that everyone's preference is honoured.
- **Prize, accept and trust each individual** – if you can demonstrate these qualities, you will give the learner the confidence to value themselves and their own judgments, and this can provide a great platform for growth and learning (See Dr Carl Rogers, *Freedom to Learn*, for further information on this).
- Recognise, when facilitating learning groups, that the **group-as-a-whole exists as an entity** in its own right. As a facilitator, you may be required to respond to it, and make interventions on its behalf.
- **Get rid of all pre-conceptions** on how groups and individuals should be, and accept each new encounter as just that – new, different, and unique. Accept what *is*, and don't seek what *should be*.
- **Be real** – don't be afraid to tell participants what you notice, what you think, what you feel.
- **Read a new book on facilitation** every quarter, or visit a website, to develop yourself and give yourself new ideas.
- Commit to **trying out one new approach** each time you facilitate.



Incorporating the UK GRAD Programme and UKHERD

About Vitae

Vitae is supported by Research Councils UK (RCUK) and managed by CRAC: The Career Development Organisation. Vitae's vision is for the UK to be world class in supporting the personal, professional and career development of researchers.

- Championing the development and implementation of effective policy
- Enhancing higher education provision through sharing practice and resources
- Providing access to development opportunities and resources
- Building an evidence base to support the researcher development agenda

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The programme develops resources for use by trainers and others working with researchers, and provides opportunities for HEIs to share information and practice; develop ideas and approaches; and work collaboratively.

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