

The facilitators' stories

A Research Paper by Stuart Wickes

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This study took place at Brathay during 1998/9 as part of studies for MSc in Change Agent Strategies and Skills with the University of Surrey, Human Potential Research Group. The full research thesis is available at Surrey University, Brathay and via the author. If you are interested in pursuing this inquiry or something similar, in theory or in practice, then do get in touch.

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The facilitators' stories

"What's it like to facilitate at your very best?"

AN INQUIRY INTO FACILITATORS' PEAK EXPERIENCES OF FACILITATING AT BRATHAY

"You can't teach somebody to do these things appropriately.. you can't tell somebody that in Act 1 Scene 3 you have to move across to the right and that will be a brilliant move... because as soon as it is planned it ceases to become brilliant... and that's the difficulty in developing excellence.... because it's all about what is appropriate at that second"

Introduction

The dictionary definition of 'facilitation' sounds straightforward enough - "to make easy, to lessen the labour of." Well, we could all do with help from someone who can do a bit of that for us now and again.

When working with people from the worlds of education & training, counseling & therapy, and business & management, I regularly meet people who describe themselves as 'facilitators' - executives running business meetings, trainers leading workshops, consultants advising on organizational change, therapists working with clients. Paradoxically this simple-to-define concept conceals a bewildering array of personal meanings and practices in a wide range of settings.

And so, as a 'facilitator' myself, I find myself asking What do these people really mean when they say they facilitate? What do they actually do? What's it like for them to facilitate or to be facilitated by

them? How does their practice compare with mine and what can I learn from them?

This is no idle inquiry though. For practising facilitators these questions, keenly pursued, can deepen your understanding of the practice of facilitation and develop your own practice by understanding and experiencing the practice of others. And for those who engage or employ facilitators the questions are important too - they can enhance your understanding of what's on offer and what you might get for your money.

Researching peak experiences of facilitation

During 1998/9 my personal inquiry into facilitation took me to Brathay to deepen my understanding of the practice of facilitation in Outdoor Management Development (OMD) programmes. A range of experiences are used by Brathay as vehicles for learning including the 'outdoors'. I worked with a group of eight facilitators, all active in facilitating experiential learning events for Brathay's business clients, to explore with them their peak experiences of facilitation, of working at what they considered to be their best.

I used a mixture of questionnaires, in-depth inquiry interviews and groupwork to capture detailed descriptions of personal experiences of excellence in facilitation. Through structured analysis of the interview transcripts and extended reflection on my discussions and encounters I wanted to understand and articulate just what facilitation involved and meant to these facilitators, what it is was like for them to facilitate, and how they experienced it when they were doing it at their best.

This was a piece of phenomenological research designed to understand the subjective experiences of these eight individuals and to articulate the essence of those experiences and structures of meaning associated with them. It was not research into the how-to, process, organisational aspects or outcomes of facilitation, nor an inquiry into who the facilitators were, their backgrounds, skills or experience. It was a search for understanding of what it is like to facilitate, a search to understand and describe the experience of

excellence in facilitation 'in the moment', from the facilitators perspective.

This short paper presents a few key findings from this research. Firstly I present some very short illustrative extracts from participants stories of excellence in facilitation. Then I offer a model outlining five recurring themes in their stories; features of their experience of excellence. Finally I offer some practical suggestions for facilitators, providers and users of facilitators interested in creating excellence in facilitation.

For me inquiry is living and ongoing; as I rediscovered in this inquiry, finding an answer to a question may paradoxically not be as helpful as finding the question! Think of this paper as less of an answer and more of a stimulus for your own curiosity and questions.

Stories of excellent practice

One of my primary aims in research was to tell the facilitator's story, to bring the voice of practicing facilitators to the literature on facilitation. Participants were asked to describe in detail experiences of their very best work. I asked them to re-associate with and relive these experiences, to describe from within "exactly what it is like to be facilitating at this time" At this point participants often turned to metaphor as a way of expressing themselves, offering metaphorical insight into their peak experiences of facilitation:

"... the whole process is about giving people opportunities... and helping them to actually grasp something. it's not just hanging the flower in the air in front of them.... it's about getting them to believe it's worth grabbing.... And enabling them to grab it "

"It's like a sort of bubble I think.. here's the bubble... and you're ok in there, responsible for your own actions and so on ... but as facilitator I'm responsible for the edges of the bubble.... for ensuring we don't get beyond our contract... and if it does start to bubble out the side... I should do something about it"

"An image which comes to mind is of someone weaving a complex tapestry... with many threads and strands..... and somehow they create a picture... and they can relate that thread back to where that one came from... it's very complex and yet very clearly understood... the whole picture and the detail and how it all fits together...."

"It's like a house of cards not particularly for its inherent going to end in tears kind of nature..... but just the fragility of what the facilitator is contributing to the creation of.... and it only needs a tiny adjustment somewhere for the whole thing to all fall down..... and then it requires time to recreate what has fallen... it's not a case of being quick and easy to put back together again... "

"I'm outside the vehicle... speaking in through hopefully a very open window... and suggesting, proposing, asking about.... what would it be like, how would you rate it if we put it into fourth.. what's your rev counter showing at the moment.. are you in the red yet or is there a way still to go? And occasionally it's reaching over and having a bit of a blip on the accelerator, knowing there's a bit of room left... allowing that to inform people to be able to get the courage to go another stage.... it's working at high speed, low revs, in top gear.. when working excellently it's a very light touch..."

The research interviews yielded fourteen detailed 'stories' about experiences of facilitating, individual's stories about their very best work, describing personal experiences which for them were associated with excellent practice. The quotes above (drawn directly from these stories) illustrate how such data offers a tantalising glimpse into the essence, structure and meanings associated with the experience of excellence in facilitation for these people. The full stories run to many pages of detailed description and exploration, too much to reproduce here. Analysis of these stories gives us a deeper insight into the experience of excellence.

The situations in which excellence occurred

Analysis of the situations described in the stories tells us about the *context* in which excellence occurs. These stories provide examples of excellent practice in event and activity design, opening and establishing programmes, running and supervising activities, reviewing experiences, working with emergent group process, and in closing a programme. Together they highlight the many different situations in which excellence may occur in the facilitators work.

The action context in which excellence occurred

Analysis of the narrative of the stories tells us something about the facilitators *intentions, actions, or focus of attention* in their work during experiences of excellence. Figure 1 summarises the main narrative themes of each the 14 stories, illustrating the kinds of things these facilitators seemed to be paying attention to and valuing in the moments of excellence explored with them. I think of this as a partial, emerging map of key aspects of excellent practice at Brathay. Table 1 gives summary descriptions of the essence of each of these stories, offering a little more detail and insight into the stories the facilitators had to tell.

The facilitators' lived experience of excellence

Detailed analysis of the stories suggests that these facilitators have uniquely personal experiences of excellence but these individual experiences also share common themes. I think of these common themes as the structure and essence of the lived experience of facilitative excellence amongst these eight facilitators at Brathay.

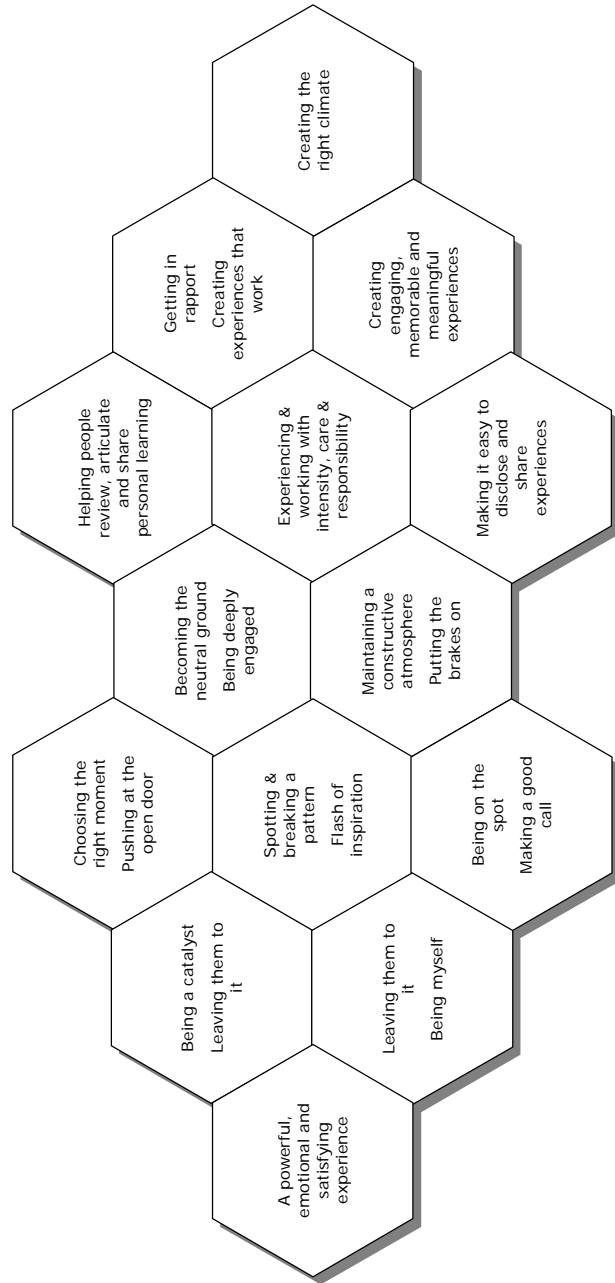


Figure 1: A partial map of aspects of facilitative excellence in OMD.

Table 1: Summary descriptions of the facilitators' 14 stories of excellent practice.

Participant	Main Narrative Theme	Summary description of story
1 Wendy	Being on the spot and making a good call	Part way through a programme, she had to assume leadership in the group and make a decision in the moment about which way to go with them. She experiences uncertainty, ambiguity and risk and a dilemma about whether to do 'what she likes' or what is in the best interests of the group. Her "gut instinct" helps her through it and she finds she did make 'the right call.'
2 Wendy	Getting in rapport, creating experiences that work	She is "pulled out of herself" when she meets "rowdy, sexist repartee" at a pre-course briefing. She quickly "tunes in" to the group and establishes "rapport" by matching their "energy, culture and way of being" to establish a good working relationship. She designs an activity to mirror and connect with specific aspects of their "real world." She uses this with "powerful" facilitated review sessions to help them achieve outcomes which are important to them and to plan to use this back in the "real world"
3 Robert	Creating the right climate	He describes working with a colleague with "an impressive and engaging style." He manages the physical and psychological environment to create "a vibrant atmosphere and climate" with the groups he works with. This enables them to "make the running" and "set the pace" while he "holds it all together", "gently steers people", "challenges them with high expectations" and "connects things up" with great "mental agility" to bring about "deep seated change in attitudes and behaviours."
4 Robert	Maintaining a constructive atmosphere, putting the brakes on	Facilitating a 'real issues' discussion, he senses it veering towards "personal attacks", notices people becoming "edgy and uncomfortable" and decides in the moment to "put the brakes on" and do something else. He holds onto the issue and creates an opportunity to deal with it in a way which proves "more productive and "conducive to building relationships".

Participant	Main Narrative Theme	Summary description of story
5 James	Creating engaging, memorable and meaningful experiences	He designs and facilitates a sophisticated, "powerful and memorable" simulation experience, mirroring key aspects of the participants' business. The analogy helps "engage and energise" people and so seems to aid learning and transfer of learning. The experience facilitates "deep lessons" about teamworking in line with the aims of the programme.
6 James	Becoming the neutral ground, being deeply engaged	He is working with a team when he senses latent conflict surfacing. He experiences uncertainty and ambiguity: "not knowing where the issues lay." He becomes intensely focused, energised and aware, his mind working at "lightning speed", experiencing "deep engagement with the group." He stays "calm and in control", directing the group, "being careful" with his every word, expression and action to "become the neutral ground" he senses is needed in that moment. This facilitates surfacing, expression and exploration of different viewpoints, "absorbs all the negative energy and makes it into something neutral."
7 James	Helping people review, articulate and share personal learning	He invents a way to help people reflect upon their experience of the course, identify and express moments of significant learning. He devises, offers and explains a framework suggesting four kinds of learning insight, expressed in everyday terms. He helps people relax and reconnect with their learning, reminding them of the story of the week, directing their attention to different aspects of the experience. People are invited to share their learning and the discussion "flows" with minimal facilitation, contributions "blend together" in a "natural chain" generating "excellent material" for "action planning."
8 Julie	A powerful, emotional and satisfying experience	She takes a risk in facilitating a closing session in which participants disclose their personal learning. It proves powerful and emotional, a "unique and memorable moment" with an "electric atmosphere". She does very little other

Participant	Main Narrative Theme	Summary description of story
9 Julie	Leaving them to it, being myself	than "holding the atmosphere" as the process unfolds with "a momentum of its own, cradling it but not controlling it " She meets herself in her own emotional journey of nervousness, anxiety, discomfort and finally pleasure with the results and the feedback from the client. She takes a calculated early risk with a group, "letting go" and "trusting" them to take "responsibility" for their own learning by managing a review without her. She is "surprised" and "pleased" at the "quality" outcome they produce and their "mature" response to this "challenge." She becomes "more herself" and less the "facilitator", establishes a peer relationship with them with greater investment in, commitment to and enthusiasm for the group. She opens herself to feedback from them and experiences a sense of "mutual vulnerability" by sharing her humanness with them in the same way they do with her.
10 Graham	Experiencing working with intensity, care and responsibility	He sets up and facilitates an "emotionally intense" opening session with an unusual level of self disclosure. His micro actions in setting up and facilitating it encourage and support a particular way of relating in the group. He is "totally engaged, alert and focused in on the process" taking responsibility for maintaining a "safe" atmosphere, respecting the risk which participants take in disclosure. The sense of care and responsibility for maintaining the atmosphere is described as like "holding an egg"
11 Graham	Making it easy to disclose and share experiences	He is "struggling" to find a "different way" to review an experience to provide contrast and texture in the programme. He asks for help and experiments with a non-verbal method to "enable" easy expression and sharing of feelings within the group. He sets it up carefully by authentically "modeling" how to do it. The resulting review "flows", providing "an opportunity" for people to compare experiences, explore the "emotional world" of the group, "see how others were feeling" and "give feedback in a way which is easy"

Participant	Main Narrative Theme	Summary description of story
12 Owen	Choosing the right moment, pushing at the open door	He is working with a group with "entrenched" patterns of behaviour who are avoiding issues they say they want to tackle. He is dissatisfied with this, allows it for a while but then decides to confront it by intervening to gently "push" and "direct" them to get what they want from the programme. He chooses "right moment" for this when he "feels they were ready to do it because they wanted to rather than because I wanted them to." sensitive to the undesirable possibility of compliance.
13 Antony	Spotting and breaking a pattern, a flash of inspiration	He is working with a team exhibiting a recurring "pattern of frustration" in their meetings. He had tried taking them to a "new environment" to try and "unblock" this with no effect so sought to try something "completely different". In a "flash" he weighs up "the risk", judges he can "pull it off" by catching the eye of one "respected person in the group" and then asks the whole group to suddenly stand up and "sing the national anthem" and "see what happens". This "breaks the state", everybody changes seats and suddenly the whole thing has a different feel.
14 Geoffrey	Being a catalyst, leaving them to it	He is working with a group of managers and prepares "a whole armoury of games and exercises" but ends up not using any of them. The group takes "hold of the day" and he ends up "sitting and observing most of the time" making a "few appropriate inputs", acting much more as "a catalyst" rather than "managing the group." He experiences uncertainty, "not being sure how much he contributed to the outcomes of the day", imagining they could have "done it without him". The group is very clear "they wouldn't have achieved what they did" without the "quality of contribution" he made to the "process"

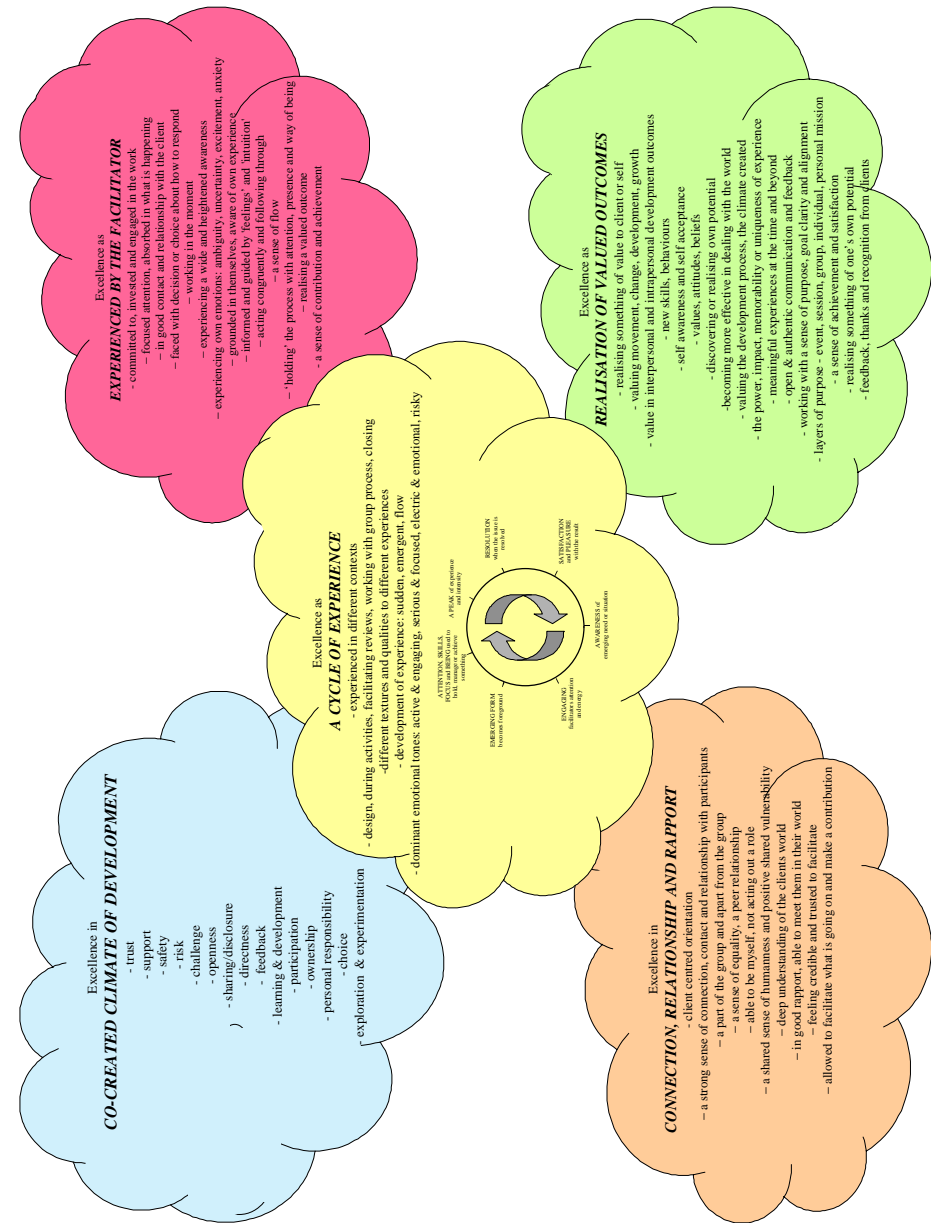


Figure 2: Five key features of the experience of facilitative excellence in OMD.

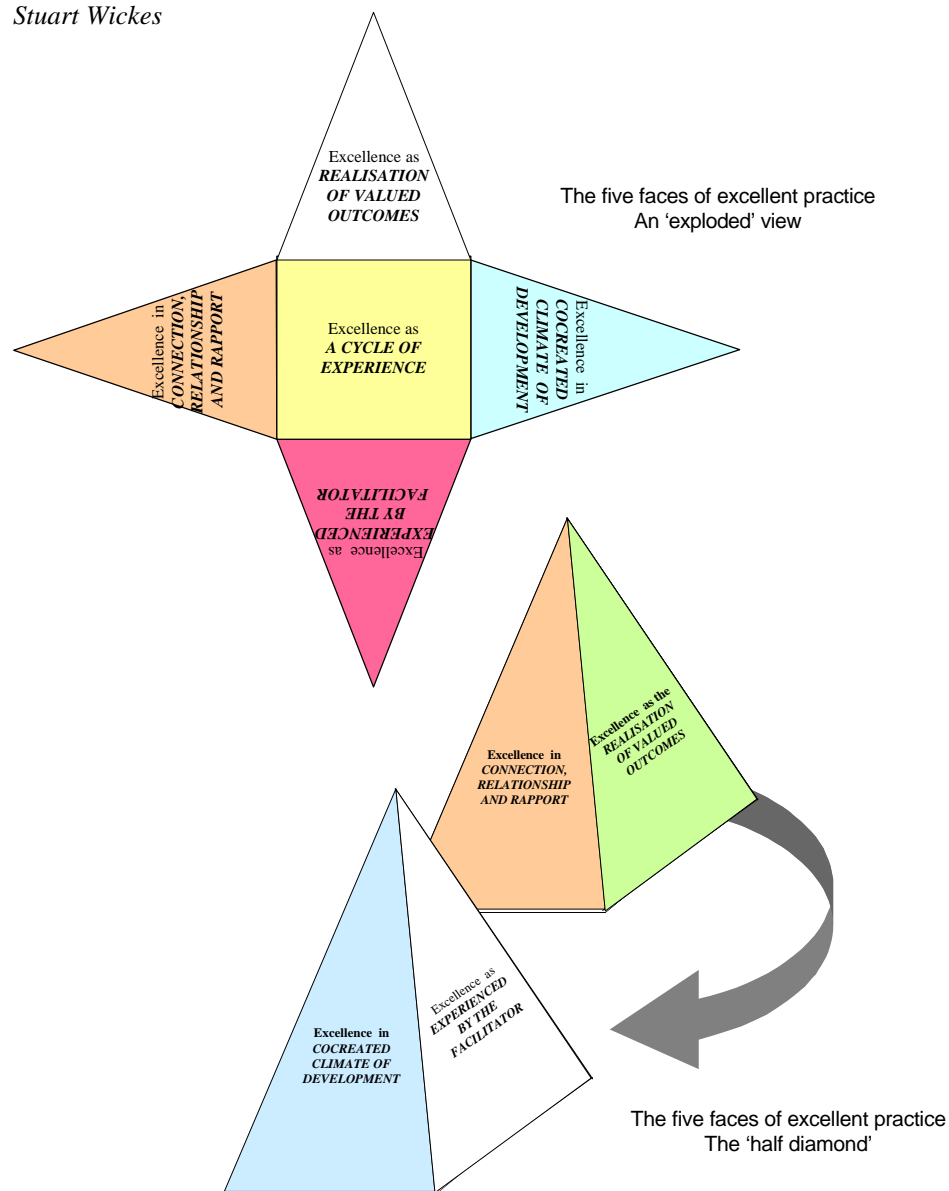


Figure 3: The five faces of facilitative excellence in OMD.

The lived experience of facilitative excellence has five key features, illustrated in Figure 2.

1. It involves a *cycle of experience* with a flow, form and features similar to the Gestalt cycle of experience. This starts with an emerging sense of awareness of a need or dissatisfaction, which becomes the focus of intense engagement, through this an issue takes form which the facilitator focuses attention on and works with, eventually the experience peaks, and at some point is resolved with a consequent sense of satisfaction. This cycle is experienced in a range of different contexts, with differing timeframes, textures and emotional tones.
2. It is an experience which takes place within a particular '*co-created climate of development*'. This is a psychological climate co-created by the facilitator working with the client group, characterised by: trust, support and safety; openness, disclosure and feedback; participation, personal responsibility and choice; risk, challenge, exploration and experimentation; learning and development.
3. It is an experience of a *strong 'connection, relationship and rapport'* with the client, characterised by: mutual trust; a deep understanding of the client's world; a sense of equality and freedom to move between being a leader, peer or human being as appropriate.
4. It is a '*particular internal experience*' as a human being in the role of facilitator - characterised by: feeling committed to and invested in the work; experiencing focus, intensity and engagement; working in and finding a way through in the moment; engaging and being in touch with one's own emotions; being guided by feelings and intuition; having a sense of wide and heightened awareness; experiencing a sense of flow.

5. It is an experience of '*realising something of value*'; of working with a sense of purpose, with clarity about what a desirable outcome is; of realising something in process or outcomes which is valued by facilitator or client; experiencing a sense of satisfaction and achievement in realising something of value.

These are five different features of the same phenomenon. Consider them as five faces of a three dimensional crystal. If the crystal represents excellent practice then each of the five faces is a different perspective on the same phenomenon. Each face gives us a glimpse into the essence but at the same time is only one view, only part of the whole as illustrated in Figure 3.

So what?

In this research I intentionally focused on studying the experience of facilitating in OMD; and within that broad field I focused in on facilitation practice in the corporate development department of one UK organization, Brathay. Within this department I worked with a group of just eight facilitators making this a focused case study of the experience of facilitating in one small part of a broad field. In research terms the study really only articulates the experiences of this specific group of practitioners at this specific provider. Strictly speaking I could argue that the findings have no validity or application beyond this setting.

However, in a hologram each part contains something of the whole. Break a holographic image in two and the whole image can be seen in each part. If we consider this limited field of inquiry as part of a greater whole, we might imagine it as a study of part of the whole provider organization or part of the whole field of OMD or part of the whole field of facilitation. It is interesting then to consider whether and what the work of these practitioners might tell us about practice in these wider fields, and to consider what practical suggestion these findings might have for facilitators, provider

organizations like Brathay, or for users of OMD and facilitators - particularly those with an interest in achieving excellence in facilitation.

The following suggestions are rooted in the findings of this inquiry. In the spirit of inquiry you might ask yourself whether pursuing them could make a difference to the quality of your experience of facilitation.

Practical suggestions for practicing facilitators

- *Pursue your own inquiry into excellence in your practice*

My experience of pursuing the inquiry leads me to believe that reflective inquiry is in fact a fundamental aspect of excellent practice. Committing to inquiry into excellence in your field of work leads inwards and outwards: inwards in critical inquiry into your own practice, the values, assumptions and beliefs which underpin it; outwards in inquiring into others practice and experience, in understanding what they value and work towards. My experience of this process is it creates uncertainty, ambiguity, insight, creativity and growth and is in itself part of the path towards excellence in practice. It helps the practitioner surface and re-evaluate assumptions, question values and beliefs, experiment and try new things out and learn through the comparison of one's own practice with others. It helps develop the qualities of a reflective practitioner, someone focused on continuing spirals of inquiry, learning and self-development.

Could you improve the quality of your practice by engaging in an inquiry into excellence in your own field of work?

- *Develop your ability to reproduce the conditions of excellence*

Reflective inquiry alone is insufficient to develop facilitative skill; experience is the other key element. Many of the facilitative skills highlighted in the stories cannot be 'taught' or 'learnt' in a conventional classroom; they are skills best developed through active experience in the field, where practitioners face and learn to deal with

the everyday ambiguities and uncertainties of live facilitation. It is through engaging with and reflecting upon this experience that they may come to recognise and realise their own style, ways of relating, patterns of responding, guiding assumptions, values and beliefs.

This study suggests that excellence in facilitating involves qualitatively different areas of attention to those focused on in this field, such as - contracting, activity design, activity briefing, frontloading, listening, questioning, feedback, reviewing, transfer of learning etc. While all of these are clearly essential skills for a competent OMD facilitator, this work suggests that other areas might be the distinguishing features of excellent practice. Facilitators interested in pursuing excellence might consider developing their abilities to recreate the conditions of excellence, highlighted by this study.

Could you improve the quality of your facilitation, your own and your clients experience of it, by enhancing your ability to:

- commit personally to a piece of work?
- establish strong, trusting, flexible relationship with clients?
- work with clarity of intention at macro and micro levels?
- attend to and focus attention on working in the moment?
- work with feelings and intuition?
- articulate and realise the outcomes you value?

If we assume for a moment that facilitator excellence is linked with these qualities of experience, then we could assume that these areas are key ones to focus on in facilitator development.

- *Establish some professional supervision for yourself*

Excellent facilitators need to be skilful and effective experiential learners to be able to pursue their own development. It is a case of practice what you practice and preach then; facilitators need to learn from their experience in much the same way as they expect participants to learn from theirs through the experiential learning process.

Practitioners may need some help with this. Much as the OMD facilitator helps participants surface assumptions, notice blind spots, recognise characteristic ways of relating, get feedback on their impact, so too they may need some help with this themselves in pursuing their own development. Practitioners and their employers should consider the need for and value of paired working, peer supervision, shadow consulting or other forms of professional supervision to support the ongoing personal and professional development of facilitators.

Could you benefit from some professional supervision to enhance the quality of your work and support your ongoing personal development? How could you set this up?

Practical suggestions for provider organizations

There are implications for providers too, the organizations who deliver OMD events and facilitators to the market-place. A useful question from the providers point of view is "What can we do to enable and support excellent practice?" There are patterns in the experiences of excellence which suggest areas of attention which might help support and encourage excellent work.

- *Maintain a climate of development for practitioners*

The need and value of some form of professional supervision to support facilitator development has already been mentioned. Creating and maintaining a climate and processes which support facilitator development is an obvious area to consider but not necessarily easy to achieve.

Could you do more to formalise, protect, encourage or support facilitator supervision or development?

- *Encourage a deep understanding of client worlds and needs*

It seems that excellence occurs when the facilitator has a strong relationship and connection with the client, a deep understanding of

their world and their needs, and a clear and mutually agreed contract within which to work. It enables facilitators to make connections and design experiences which have meaning in the clients world and frame of reference.

To support excellent practice, provider organizations might consider how best to organize themselves, their sales, marketing and business processes, and their facilitators to:

- support the development of strong relationships between the event facilitator, sponsor and participants;
- help facilitators gain a deep understanding of the client needs, client system and broader outcomes sought;
- establish clear mutually agreed, three-way contracts for events, articulating desired outcomes for the event and more broadly in the organizational system beyond, signed up to by sponsor, participants and facilitator.

Practical suggestions for users

The findings from these stories suggest a number of things that users of OMD might consider when working with facilitators; things which may enhance the quality of the learning experience and the facilitation services provided.

- *Ask yourself "Is this what you really want?"*

Users might begin by considering the kind of climate which these facilitators seek to create and the extent to which this fits with their prevailing organizational culture or the kind of culture they wish to promote, nurture, encourage or move towards. In particular users might carefully consider the risks involved in contracting for an environment of open communication, particularly where that is not the norm within their group or organization. Sponsors enrolling others onto OMD programmes would be wise to consider this from individual participants perspectives as well as their own.

Users might also consider the kinds of development outcomes the facilitators seek to bring about and the extent to which they match the kinds of outcomes they are seeking to develop. They should bear in mind that OMD is a catalyst for personal development, outcomes cannot be guaranteed and be prepared for the fact that ongoing development or unforeseen outcomes may be an implicit part of the deal.

- *Select your facilitator carefully*

Another area of interest from the clients perspective is that of choosing facilitators to work with. Obviously clients should look for experience and competence in OMD work but the findings point to a number of qualities associated with excellence. Some of these are qualities one might be able to experience during an exploratory meeting, qualities which if evidenced might be indicators of excellence.

Ask yourself, does this facilitator seem committed to excellence in their practice? Do they seem to work to create the conditions of excellence in their work with you?

- *Get to know and work closely with your facilitator*

Having decided to proceed, the findings suggest a number of things may help increase the quality of facilitation as experienced by the facilitator. If we assume the quality of the facilitator's experience is reflected in the quality of the client's experience of their facilitation, then users might usefully consider investing time in:

- helping the facilitator understand their business, development needs, current issues;
- helping the facilitator meet and establish relationships with participants;
- developing a clear contract about what the event is about, the desired outcomes;

- involving participants and facilitator in agreeing contract/goals for the event;
- discussing with participants the kind of working climate to expect at the event, the facilitator's role and what they will need to do to get value from the event;
- discussing values, approach and bias with the facilitator, considering how well their unique way of working fits with them, participants, their organizational culture.

Concluding (metaphorically speaking)

I now understand facilitation as "the act of intentionally intervening (or intentionally not intervening) in order to bring about change, development or learning in individuals, groups or organizations within a contract of mutual consent" As we saw at the beginning describing the experience of facilitating often seemed easier when approached through metaphor or symbolism, so perhaps that is a useful way to conclude.

Although my definition suggests facilitation is about acts of intervention, however for me there are many ways in which facilitation is more like an art. As such the metaphor of drama holds much for me as a way of understanding this highly contingent practice. Whilst the skills, training and performance ability of the actor or performance artist are no doubt important, they 'act' within a complex system of other actors, scripts, set, audience etc which interact in a complex way to produce the experience which is the performance. It is the ability of the artist (the facilitator) to work with this system which is the art.

The work of the artist is subtle and intuitive, juggling many things, a touch here, a nudge there, attending with a broad brush to the overall direction of the piece and with a fine brush to the important details, responding to what emerges within the context of some kind of personal vision or plan. This is creative work, work in

which something new is created, a fusion of many influences coming together in the moment. That transient creative moment, that moment of magic, that moment of excellence in performance in which something of your creative self is realised.

It is hard to say what makes one performance excellent and another just mediocre. Somehow the complex dynamics of the system interact with the artist as the artist interacts with them, the two coming together in a moment of synchronicity. For a while the artist and system coexist in flow and excellence is realised.

"...and the actor moves across to the stage left and everybody's going 'shit what the hell's he doing' but it turns out it was exactly the right thing to do at that time.... because the cameraman got the perfect shot, the shot that people remember..... Just like moving into the group, doing something in particular, asking one question at a particular time turns out to be the thing that made that group or those individuals have a life changing experience.... it's experience and it's skill and it's intuition...."

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Further reading on facilitation and OMD

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