



DISCUSSION #4: Facilitating for online groups and networks

Facilitating and Hosting Online Interaction

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Learning Goals:

- Understand the importance of online facilitation to a group's success.
- Ground future learning about online facilitation in the basics of face-to-face facilitation.
- Explore some online facilitation roles.

Adapted from: <http://www.fullcirc.com/community/communityfacilitation.htm>

From Webster's: Facilitation \Fa*cil`i*ta'tion\, n. The act of facilitating or making easy.

From Wordnet: facilitation n: act of assisting or making easier the progress or improvement of something free from difficulties or obstacles, to make easy or easier

Why facilitate online?

Online group interactions do not always happen spontaneously. They require care and nurturing: in other words, they require facilitation. The core of facilitation and hosting is to serve the group by assisting it in reaching its goals or purpose. The role has been described as that of a gardener, a conductor, the distributed leadership of jazz improvisers, a teacher, or an innkeeper. It can be all of these and more.

Levitt, Popkin and Hatch, in their article "[Building Online Communities for High Profile Internet Sites](#)" wrote, "Communities are organic in nature and site owners can't *make* them successful or *force* them to grow. A site owner can only provide the fertile ground on which a community may grow, and then provide some gentle guidance to help the group thrive. Much of the challenge in fostering an online community is social, rather than technical."

Facilitation is a balance among processes that enhance the group's environment, content, ability to be open to a variety of opportunities, and protection from harassment. Facilitation blends the sacred rituals around freedom of individual

expression, while preserving something of the common good. Facilitation is juggling, on a tight-rope, often without a net. The distance one can fall to the hard cold ground varies with the community's commitment to specific goals. The clearer the [purpose](#), the easier it is to craft the facilitation approach.

Who is the facilitator?

The online facilitator can be the one who convenes a group, the online community owner, or someone designated by the community owner. The role may evolve over time as the group works together. Small communities often choose just one facilitator, while large online groups with many spaces and topics might choose to facilitate in teams. Thematic knowledge networks (TKNs) can find it useful to have people working within subgroups or specialty areas as the TKN expands. TKNs might also choose to facilitate specific community tasks like planning meetings or coordinating publications. Facilitators can be unpaid volunteers. Facilitators may be a team leader or outside contractor.

Online facilitators' most important requirement is that they are as skilled group hosts and genuine, authentic communicators. In a text environment, this translates as putting people at ease and reading and writing with care and clarity.

What specifically do online facilitators do?

Facilitators in offline situations have certain established roles providing leadership, focus, stimulation for group interaction, support, team building, refereeing, dealing with problems, timekeeping, responding to member feedback and group regulation. Facilitators pass on community history and rituals. They "hold the space" for the members. Perhaps more important, facilitators often help community members do these things for themselves. These functions are also needed online, but there are also differences in tactics due to the primarily text-based nature of the online environment. Without someone taking on these responsibilities, it is easier for an online group to get sidetracked, disrupted and to abandon the project.

Facilitators' approaches depend on the nature of the community. Some communities, such as conversational, salon-type groups, need a very low-key host to succeed others, such as teams, need very clear and rapid responses, or distinct leadership qualities. Still others need facilitators to help raise the overall skill level of the community to allow the group to facilitate itself and operate effectively on its own. TKNs may benefit from facilitation to stimulate activity, connect individuals with common interests or needs, highlight contributions and focus attention on key objectives. Those doing the facilitation can be both leaders and facilitators – sometimes a challenging balance.

Successful facilitation requires the following four frameworks:

1. Understanding of group facilitation as it occurs face to face and online.
2. Understanding the design of a group's social and technical architecture. Ideally, facilitators are involved in the conceptualization, design and implementation of the

online space to ensure that group member needs are accounted for. They participate in pre-assessment, planning and evaluation.

3. Grounding in the group's purpose with full understanding and ability to clearly convey it to group members.
4. Prepared with tools and processes to support community objectives.

Based on these four frameworks, facilitators support a set of processes which include:

1. Entry and engagement processes that support members' active participation.
2. Supporting and building sociability, relationship and trust.
3. Constructing, adapting and modeling norms, agreements and accountability.
4. Supporting discussion and dialogue by fostering communication.
5. Supporting divergent, convergent and task-oriented group processes that help to get the work done.
6. Anticipating and working with conflict and abrasion to both allow the emergence of new ideas and protect people from harassment.
7. Work with full understanding of diversity in learning style, culture and personal styles.
8. Creating group participation cycles and "rituals" in the online environment and making them visible.
9. Summarizing, harvesting, weaving and supporting appropriate content and connections.
10. Providing basic help as needed with the tools and technology.
11. Ensuring the space is kept "tidy" and navigable.
12. Helping the community evaluate and improve over time.

To get a sense of some of the wide variety of facilitator roles, you might optionally wish to read about it from first-hand accounts in [Hosts on Hosting](#). As you consider your role as facilitator and those in the linked stories, you will probably find that you are doing a combination job, utilizing a range of skills. Furthermore, facilitation varies over time as a community matures and its members start to take on various roles. There are many metaphors used for facilitation that elaborate on the power and challenges of the role. Here are some examples along with links to resources.

The Team or Project Manager

In communities with a focused task, work orientation or subject, the team manager pays attention to focus, timelines, task lists, commitments and process. This role can be seen as group leadership and/or support. This can be aided by the use of static web pages to organize information, the combined use of linear and threaded conferencing spaces, and the regular use of summaries and reviews. Skills include traditional project management and organization.

Applications include:

- Virtual work groups and teams

- Online events (especially those that have time-limits)

Key skills include:

- Traditional project management skills W
- Writing and summarizing skills
- Technical skills such as HTML to create information and summaries with visual impact
- The ability to abstract information and process/organize it for the group

Links to articles

- [Interview With Sue Thomas](#)
- [Case Study: the IBM/Electric Minds' 'Kasparov vs.. Deep Blue'](#)
- [Developing the Team's Communication Strategy](#) by Lisa Kimball (pdf)

The Community of Practice (CoP) Facilitator (or Coordinator)

CoPs share and build knowledge around a practice. Part of this process is developing a group identity – developing a reputation, being able to build agreements, and maintaining sense of accountability to rest of the individuals and the group purpose. Facilitating CoPs online can focus on the components of these "sociability" and relationship issues. This work includes helping members get to know each other, articulating and making visible agreements, and watching/nurturing group dynamics. Skills include group facilitation and a working knowledge of CoPs. Many of these processes are also applicable to TKNs.

Applications include:

- Internal formal and informal CoPs
- Cross organizational CoPs
- Formal and informal learning communities.

Key skills include:

- Group facilitation skills
- Cybrarianship (online librarianship)
- Passion for community
- Ability to foster behaviors within the community that allow individuals to facilitate the work themselves

Links to articles

- [The Rationale for Growing Communities of Practice as On-Line Support for Dissemination and Implementation of Innovation](#) by Bronwyn Stuckey

- [Evolving communities of practice: IBM Global Services experience](#), by P. Gongla and C. R. Rizzuto

The Cybrarian

Cybrarians, or online librarians, represent the gift of knowledge and information. They are topical experts. Cybrarians help members find information internally and externally of the community. They organize information and make it accessible. And they stimulate interaction with the introduction of or pointer to new and relevant information. Without a doubt, Cybrarians are critical to success in TKNs.

Applications include:

- Virtual workgroups and teams
- Topic-oriented conversation communities
- Help desks
- Distance learning settings

Key skills include:

- Web-savvy research
- Strong organizational bent
- Love of learning and information

The Social Host

The social host, otherwise known as host-as-innkeeper, is the most well-known online facilitation model. It originates from long time discussion communities such as [The Well](#), [Electric Minds](#) (note, this page seems to be rarely up anymore) and [Salon Table Talk](#).

In the same way that a dinner host brings together the elements of a successful party, a social host helps create an environment where the members feel comfortable to participate. The social host is part conversationalist, part counselor, part role model and sometimes even part bouncer. Most of all, social hosts are also usually *part* of the conversation.

Applications include:

- Social, conversational communities
- Helping entrants feel "at home" and acclimated in work groups and communities of practice
- Customer service

Key skills include:

- Greeter
- Social skills
- Conversation stimulator (content, style, process)
- The ability to embody a persona or a character other than that of his or her true identity. This is only sometimes necessary.
- Conflict resolution (particularly in open, public online communities)

Links to articles on this style of hosting, as well as some hosts on hosting who play the role with panache.

- <http://www.rheingold.com/texts/artonlinehost.html>
- The Well's Host Manual (with particular attention to chapters 1, 2 and 5
<http://www.well.com/confteam/hostmanual/>)

The Help Desk

In online interaction spaces where there is an ongoing influx of new members, there is often a repeated need for pointers on how to use the software or to help understand the community's purpose and guidelines. If your TKN has a complex or large array of tools, it may be helpful to have a person identified to facilitate the learning and use of technology. This role is known as the Help Desk.

Applications include:

- E-Commerce and service organizations
- Larger communities where new folks need help with the software

Key skills include:

- Technical understanding
- Patience
- Clear communication skills

The Referee

Good cop or bad cop, the referee brings attention to and/or enforcing community norms, rules and procedures. Referees help the community regulate themselves, protect members and deal with problems. For example, if a community has a policy that prohibits the posting of advertisements, the referee enforces the policy. They may have the job of deleting offending posts and asking the poster to refrain from posting ads. Remember: the clearer the rules, the easier the job. In addition, when rules are unclear, the referee's behavior is often perceived as authoritarian and arbitrary. Referees are often not "regular members" who are "just part of the conversation," but a role apart.

Applications include:

- Social, conversational communities

- Topic oriented discussion groups
- Customer service
- Workgroups

Key skills include:

- Thick skin and a slow fuse
- Internet experience
- Familiarity with common netiquette (online etiquette)

Links to articles

- [Netiquette Basics!](#)

The Janitor

It can get messy in cyberspace, as we leave our words in conferences and topics. The Janitor tidies up forgotten topics by freezing and archiving, redirects activity if it is in the wrong area, and generally tidies up. In large TKNs this is an important function and should work closely with the Cybrarian.

Applications include:

- Any community with multiple spaces
- High volume spaces

Key skills include:

- Familiarity with software
- Attention to detail

Co-Facilitating

Some online interaction spaces employ co-facilitators. This technique can be very helpful in busy or large spaces where one person cannot cover all the territory. Co facilitation allows the work to be spread out, which is useful in groups where everyone is participating “in addition to their regular job!” Co-facilitating can also provide training opportunities, pairing an experienced facilitator with a new facilitator.

Facilitators as Role Models

Facilitators are the most emulated members of a group – regardless of their choice to model positive or negative behaviors. They are often the first members to be challenged. Integrity, patience, a good sense of humor and a love of other people will be valued in any host. As virtual communitarian Howard Rheingold so aptly wrote, "One point of heart is worth ten points of intellect."

Sometimes the facilitator is also a member of the group. Keep in mind when playing multiple roles in a community that other members might not know which role you are "playing" at any one time. This can incite them to react in ways you might not anticipate.

In short, even if facilitators see themselves as "just members" of the community, the other members might not. This disconnection between perspectives becomes critical when there is a need for intervention or problem solving. No longer will you, the facilitator, be perceived as "just a member." And in some cases, you will never again be considered in that role. It is possible that you will always be held to a higher standard than anyone else in the group.