

Transforming participatory facilitation: Reflections from practice

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Introduction

Participatory training for personal and social transformation demands facilitation that goes beyond a focus on techniques and tools. Transformative or growth-centred approaches,¹ in particular, require that facilitators establish relationships of trust and reciprocity with participants by becoming co-learners. Co-learning implies letting go of the control of agendas and objectives as well as the pre-determined structures and roles at the root of power differences between facilitators and participants. The challenge is for participatory facilitators to reformulate their practice by making power relations transparent, by decentralising control over information and theory, and by developing a process of critical self-reflection. These changes create tensions, but the process of becoming a reflexive facilitator can lead to self-actualisation and the re-discovery of the spiritual dimensions of learning and transformation.

I. The essence: Building relationships of reciprocal trust

The majority of educators learn in an educational system dominated by didactic teaching methods that assume that the learner is an empty vessel to be filled with information and that the teacher is the transmitter of knowledge (Freire, 1970). As facilitators or educators² we often repeat this pattern and consequently participants or students become objects instead of subjects of learning (1970). Traditional teacher/student relationships are thus based on inequality and hierarchy. Participatory education or training was conceived of, in part, to challenge this relationship. But how well are we, as participatory facilitators/educators, doing in changing ourselves to meet this challenge?

Facilitators who use tools from “popular education” or who employ participatory techniques are often called

¹There are various approaches to participatory education including education for social change or conscientisation and growth-centred or transformative education. Differences in the approaches are not exclusive, but are considered to be differences of emphases (Srinivasan, 1992).

²As reflected in the literature, the term educator here is used alternately with the terms facilitator and trainer. Similarly, participatory training, participatory education or capacity-building are used interchangeably as are the terms participants and learners.

participatory facilitators. Certainly using techniques and tools that involve people in their own learning will enhance the learning process, but to facilitate transformative learning one must engage in a participatory process with more than a “bag of tricks.” It requires embarking on a personal learning journey with the courage needed for self-discovery and personal change. When the commitment to learning and self-discovery join with skill in using participatory techniques, educators can engage in reciprocal learning with students, can fuel the growth of mutual trust, and in the process can lay the foundation for work toward lasting social change.

II. The challenge: Shifting the power

Power issues and inequalities are inherent in any educational processes and are obstacles to establishing full participation and authentic relationships (Burke, *et al*, 1991). Accordingly, power issues must be explored from the outset of training programs because the inadvertent or inappropriate use of power by facilitators interferes with the creation of an atmosphere of trust and safety. As the foundation of growth-centred approaches rests on trust, an important initial task for facilitators is to shift or decentralise power away from ourselves. In various contexts where we have practised participatory facilitation or have been participants, we have noted two major inter-related issues that often arise in making that shift. The first issue emerges from the change in moving from structured education to non-structured participatory learning. The second involves the control of information and the transparency of participatory methods. Both issues can cause tensions for facilitators and participants alike, but they ultimately enable the process of change. Both also involve confusion surrounding the multiple roles and responsibilities of a facilitator-turned-participant.

A. Changing roles and structures

For the facilitator, engaging in multiple roles of facilitator/participant can be rife with discomfort. The difficulties of knowing what role to emphasise in different contexts and groups are compounded by a lack of familiarity with participatory processes. The dilemma of knowing “how much and when to lead ... is further compounded by the fact that most people come from organisations where well-defined hierarchies and centralised decision-making rather than group

leadership... are the rules rather than the exception." (Bhasin, 1991, p.13)

Universities are notable examples of such hierarchies, and developing a participatory practice within them presents many challenges, particularly because of the demands for grades, credits, time-lines, syllabuses, etc.

We have found that including the personal and emotive aspects of learning and change, or experimenting with combinations of academic theory and community practice can vastly enrich the transformative learning potential of university classes. However, critics and sceptics view such experimentation as trivial, non-academic or irrelevant thus discouraging the willingness to experiment with curriculum and educational methods.

Students and participants can also experience discomfort by the change to a less structured learning environment. Tensions are expressed as frustration, confusion, anger, or feeling overwhelmed (Hanson, 1996; Hanson, 1997). A lack of prescribed structure can be perceived as an apparent lack of leadership and direction. Participants can feel confused by a facilitator's refusal to spell out the specific objectives of learning activities so that they 'know what to look for.' Their confusions are made worse by the inevitable silence while waiting for someone to start, to point out the relevance of something said or done, or to sum up an exercise. Eventually, however, participants do find resources within themselves to make sense of the situation and to define the meaning behind the experience. Most often, as a result, the uncomfortable silences and apparent leadership vacuum turn from confusion into a vital learning experience (Box 1).

Box 1

In a workshop on participatory training techniques, I provided participants with instructions for proceeding with an exercise on observation. People participated fully in the exercise, enjoying the challenge and having fun while doing so. However, in the debriefing, a participant challenged the facilitation style, believing she would have had more to say, if I had given more information about the objectives of the exercise so the participants would "know what to look for." The comment led to a discussion about the issue of balance between too much and too little facilitator intervention in activities, and the relation of that issue to our fear of immersing ourselves in, and experiencing situations, without pre-determined structures and goals. At the end of the workshop, the participant who initiated the discussion communicated her appreciation for the facilitation approach, commenting that she had experienced an "ah-hah" about transformative learning. Theory and practice had come together for her in that moment. (Personal recollection of L Hanson from workshop at *Deepening Our Understanding and Practice*, a participatory development forum, Ottawa, August, 1999).

While in most cases these experiences lead to positive outcomes, there are times when unresolved tension leads to a retreat from the process. (Box 2).

Box 2

[An international participant] became disenchanted with the process and her own lack of clarity about it. While for the majority of participants the fog surrounding the process had lifted after the first few days, she continued to experience a lack of clarity and a resulting sense of disempowerment. For several days near the end of the program, she retreated from the process. In one evening session, she spoke of feeling alienated, and reported sensing that the facilitators had kept secrets, had not revealed needed information, and had made hidden decisions (Hanson, L., adapted from field notes, December, 1994).

This example highlights an important issue regarding the power of information, and illustrates a dilemma for facilitators. Making the participatory theories and processes understandable and transparent, while making space for learners to discover principles of transformation relevant to their own needs in order to create their own knowledge is a difficult balance to strike for facilitators.

B. Shifting the control of information

As a source of power, the exclusive control of information, whether intentional or not, is an expression of power-over others (Starhawk, 1987). If there is a perception that some individuals have information needed by others and are not sharing it, then trust cannot be established and individuals cannot feel safe. Yet it is trust in each other and in the process that assists people through unfamiliar moments. Establishing safety in a group can be assisted by being clear about power, purpose and expectations. Creating clarity around issues of information involves opening ourselves up as facilitators, making ourselves vulnerable, becoming transparent in our methods, and letting go of the process of pre-establishing objectives, timelines, program activities and agendas. The task is to be flexible rather than rigid, to explain the multiple roles we play and to clearly relate the ideas and theories behind participatory approaches. At the same time, we must emphasise the fallibility of pre-set ideas and methods, to be honest about our lack of answers, and to establish participant experience and expectations as the guiding hands of training programs.

III. Addressing the challenges

A. Helpful contexts for transformative approaches

Our practice reflects efforts both within formal educational institutions, and in 'informal settings', such as training within a larger development or community-based program. We believe personal and social transformation, to varying degrees, are possible within different contexts and within different structures.

Within *formal* institutional contexts enabling elements include:

- finding allies – supportive people willing to back you, who trust and believe in what you are doing, who are willing to hire you; or, for students or novice teachers,

who are willing to mentor or supervise you in using participatory approaches to learning and research;

- 'Selling' participatory methods and transformative approaches using the common language of academe; sound and well-documented theories from adult education and international development, citing courses, conferences, web-sites, academic departments and academic centres of excellence etc.;
- finding, maintaining and strengthening professional networks and seeking to establish formal institutional linkages;
- putting theory into practice: finding and using alternatives to the classroom setting, such as community placements, meetings and classes off campus, field trips, etc. to break down the artificial separation between classroom facilitators and participants, whereas appropriate community settings can break down the artificial separation.

Informal participatory training contexts without a rigid curriculum design, grading and timelines, help to free up space and enable creativity. However they are not completely free from constraints. Program contexts are wide and varied, but again transformation can be facilitated by using some of the following elements in a training program:

- a physical space for the program that is in a natural setting, or has access to nature;
- a live-in residence during training (rather than participants returning home at the end of the day);
- integrating theory and practice by extending beyond the training facility to communities surrounding the training setting; and
- having supportive project managers, willing to risk open-ended transformative approaches.

B. Tools for facilitator self-reflection

Changing from facilitators to co-learners requires searching for ways to express our fallibility as educators while at the same time showing our willingness and capacity for learning. We have found that sharing stories, using 'double dialogue', and keeping a learning journal are all helpful tools to promote ongoing self-reflection.

By telling stories, including stories of failure, facilitators can liberate others to tell their own stories and to recognise experience as an important source of learning.

During training sessions, establishing an ongoing dialogue between participants and facilitators regarding the role and purpose of the facilitators, that is, what they do and why, also helps build transparency into facilitation. The process involves reviewing and naming of facilitators' actions in a kind of thinking aloud or 'double dialogue'. Essentially, double dialogue ensures that reflexivity and critical self-analysis are built into the facilitator's job.

A learning journal is also a valuable tool for documenting and analysing our personal learning journey. Journals

promote reflection and enable self-validation while helping us to trace patterns of change in ourselves, and to increase clarity about our purpose and role as facilitators.

C. Opportunities for learning with colleagues

Facilitators need to share learning with their colleagues, in person and in writing. Strangely, truly participatory opportunities to do this are rare. Typically, participatory educators attend conferences and forums where they share accounts of program successes using didactic methods to extol the virtues of participatory practice.

In the competitive world of project funding, personal lessons learned (often through trial and error) in the practice of participatory facilitation are getting selectively forgotten. In order to convince funders of our legitimacy, we are reluctant to document our errors or our personal learning. In so doing, we are denying each other and ourselves a valuable learning source.

We need opportunities as learners to work together to bring about changes that will provide a more honest and open forum for growth and self-development. For us, co-facilitation has offered many opportunities for self-reflection and growth.

Many colleagues engage in reflection through informal gatherings and networking. However, a growing need is being expressed for more frequent, widespread, sponsored, and funded learning programs and workshops where educators come together *as participants* to promote sharing and learning with colleagues.

IV. Discovering spiritual dimensions of facilitation

Vulnerability, confronting risks, trust, co-operation, passion, and patience are, essentially, the spiritual dimensions of both facilitation and learning. They should be considered as important to develop as the skills and techniques for assessment, planning, implementation and evaluation (Smith in Jaques & Dillmann, (eds.), 1997, introduction). Participatory approaches that have personal and social transformation as goals of learning and development recognise the importance of spiritual dimensions and call on facilitators to work at developing these aspects. Discovering and developing the spiritual dimension will be possible when we commit to de-constructing our practice, and re-defining our relationships with learners.

Conclusion

For facilitators, engaging in self-growth and becoming a co-learner takes courage, determination, and an open mind. By shifting power away from ourselves, by making participatory theories and methods transparent, and by developing reciprocal relationships we move beyond tools

and techniques. But, our ability to transform ourselves along with others requires that we critically reflect upon the paradigms in which we practice, expose the contradictions, and seek to re-discover the spiritual dimensions of facilitation.

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