

Difficult groups or difficult facilitators? Three steps facilitators can take to make sure they are not the problem.

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Facilitator education, Intentionality, Self-awareness, Power, Rank, Constructive alignment, Technical eclecticism, Interior council, Free attention, Theory in use, Espoused theory, Partial-yet-open awareness.

INTRODUCTION

In the early stages of my development as a group facilitator I experienced numerous difficult groups, but one particularly stands out in my memory. I was the designated leader for the educational experience, but only in title, because there was a small sub-group who clearly did not want to be there, and had little respect for others, or for the way I was trying to facilitate the group experience. However, their disruptive behaviour was rarely explicit, and the lack of overt problems left me afraid to confront the sub-group's behaviour. Unfortunately, I took it very personally, I felt a strong sense of rejection, I was tangled in their web, and my confidence with the whole group waned. I doubted my ability to provide a safe container to explore the cause of the unrest, and my responses to the sub-group became more defensive, deteriorating my interactions with the whole group. The 'voices in my head' had no trouble highlighting my ineptitude, and for me the experience could not end fast enough.

Sooner or later, most facilitators come across the "group from hell." With such groups, no matter what the facilitator does the group can still seem to be stuck or worse still, regressing. There can also be an uneasy tension caused by unresolved issues within the group and/or between the group and the facilitator. Sometimes, groups are just hard work. Other times, we as the facilitators may be part of the problem, albeit unknowingly. It is not difficult for facilitators to get caught up in the group issues and contribute to its ineffectiveness. If we are honest, most facilitators would acknowledge they have had experiences like the one described above, although we may try and repress such unpleasant memories.

A group facilitator's purpose is to help the participants to achieve their individual and common goals. When a group encounters a difficulty it can place considerable demand on the skills, knowledge, and experience of the facilitator to help the group find a resolution. Unfortunately, facilitators can also unknowingly contribute to the difficulties their groups experience if they lack those skills, knowledge, or experience. Hence, my underlying premise is that sometimes the source of the difficulties that a group may experience lies not with the participants, but with the facilitator. I will highlight some examples of when this may occur, identify some causes, and suggest ways to address the problems.

In addition to my personal experience, the assertions I make are based on my research exploring the theories and practices of facilitator educators (Thomas, 2007). My study used interviews and participant observations with seven facilitator educators in Australia and New Zealand. The primary recommendation of the study was that to become effective group facilitators, the emerging facilitators should receive education and training focused on the four aspects of *technical facilitator education*, *intentional facilitator education*, *person-centred facilitator education*, and *critical facilitator education* (see Thomas, 2008a; 2008b, in press). I maintain that participation in a comprehensive, balanced facilitator education program, focusing on these four aspects, should produce graduates who are technically capable, intentional, perceptive, and politically aware as shown in Figure 1. If a facilitator's overall education and training is unbalanced they run the risk of causing difficulties for groups. In the next section I will focus on three avoidable, yet common, problems that groups experience that may be resolved through better facilitator education.

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HOW THE FACILITATOR CAN CONTRIBUTE TO THREE COMMON GROUP DIFFICULTIES

Three common problems that occur in groups and that may be associated with ineffective facilitation, are: *unclear purposes and misaligned activities*, *defensive and over-reactive communication*, *abuses of power*. This is a by no means a conclusive list of problems, but based on my study these three problems warrant greater attention in the preparation of group facilitators.

Problem 1: Misaligned activities

Despite high levels of activity, the effectiveness of some groups is limited either by their failure to rally behind a common purpose, or by a lack of clarity on how to work towards that purpose. Consequently, such groups wallow in uncertainty and in-effectiveness, leading to dissatisfied and frustrated group members. When considering the group structure from the rational perspective, goals, objectives and tasks need to be clearly defined to enhance group effectiveness. If the facilitator does not help the group to establish a clear purpose

everyone is obliged to assume the purpose – and assumptions are most likely to be different. Even mild differences about the purpose of a group can and will lead to misunderstandings. Facilitators or group members who say there is no time for setting a purpose do not understand the power of setting intention. (Hunter, 2007, p. 39)

Similarly, from the perspective of group process, the random or inappropriate use of tools, strategies and activities by facilitators can have an equally detrimental effect on group effectiveness. The availability of facilitation resources (for example, Bendaly, 2000; Bens, 2005; Havergal & Edmonstone, 1999), is helpful but not sufficient to ensure the facilitator will know how and when to best apply these tools, strategies, and activities. It is foolish for facilitators to collect skills, strategies and tricks for their toolbox and think that they can effectively apply them in a formulaic manner without any clear understanding of their

potential impact on a group's functioning (Weaver & Farrell, 1997). Schwarz (2002) argued that facilitators,

not only need a set of methods and techniques but also an understanding of how and why they work . . . you see the reasoning that underlies each technique and method . . . you can improvise and design new methods and techniques consistent with the core values. (p. 9)

Problem 2: Defensive and over-reactive communication

Upon reflection, most group facilitators will be able to describe a time when they were not at their best when working with a group. In such times, some group participants seem to have an amazing ability to get "under the facilitator's skin" or "press the facilitator's buttons," which can lead to defensiveness and inappropriate responses from the facilitator. When considering important group process factors from a relational perspective, there is no doubt that being *triggered* in this way reduces the facilitator's levels of *free attention*, which Hunter (2007) described as "that part of your awareness not caught up with thoughts, feelings (emotions) and body sensations" (p. 51). The negative consequences when a facilitator gets distracted in this way are twofold: 1) he or she is less able to serve the group, and 2) some participants can be distracted from working towards the group's purpose by being drawn into conflict with the facilitator. Either way, the group is less able to achieve its desired outcomes.

Problem 3: Abuses of power

A group facilitator, by virtue of his or her role, can have significant power or influence over participants and the group process. This power and influence can be used in a positive manner to assist the group to achieve its purpose, or the power can be misused to service hidden agendas and privilege certain interests. Facilitators can create problems in groups by mismanaging the power relationships between participants or failing to consider those whose views are marginalized. This may occur when a facilitator makes incorrect assumptions about participants and fails to acknowledge diversity, uses stereotypes or sexist language, or uses activities which do not allow all members to participate in a meaningful way. This mismanagement of power in groups is not always deliberate, but that does not justify the facilitator's action (or inaction) when such behaviour occurs. If facilitators are unaware of the way they use or misuse their power or authority in a group they may unintentionally contribute to the group's ineffectiveness, which is a good example of a structural problem from the political perspective.

WHY THE FACILITATOR MAY CONTRIBUTE TO THESE PROBLEMS

Why do facilitators contribute to these three problems? Of course, these problems may have multiple causes and the discussion that follows does not imply direct single-causal relationships between these three problems and the facilitator's actions or inactions. However, my contention is that facilitators can contribute to: 1) unclear purposes and misaligned

activities if they *fail to ensure constructive alignment*; 2) defensive and over-reactive communication if they *lack self-awareness*; 3) abuses of power if they *mismanage their role*.

Facilitator contributions to problem 1: Failure to ensure constructive alignment

The first problem, unclear purposes and misaligned activities, is often caused by a lack of constructive alignment. This term was coined by Biggs and Tang (2007) to describe the process of systematically aligning learning activities with desired outcomes in a higher education context. This structural problem has direct relevance to group facilitation contexts too, and it is not uncommon to see groups busy with tasks or activities that do not effectively contribute to the successful achievement of desired outcomes. Key tasks for a group facilitator include helping the group define its purpose, and then selecting (or helping the group to select) the best strategies to achieve that purpose. This process of strategy selection implies that there are some underlying principles or theories that can guide the group facilitator. However, the literature presents confusing perspectives on the relationship between the theory and practice of facilitation. For example, a puzzling comment in a preface of a book on advanced facilitation strategies reads, "while references are made throughout this book to the experts who have given facilitation its theoretical underpinnings, the strategies described in this resource represent practical techniques found to work in everyday situations" (Bens, 2005, p. xii). This could be taken to imply that theoretical underpinnings are not relevant to the effective practice of group facilitation.

In group counseling, the use of practices without a clear understanding of the reasons for using them is called *technical eclecticism* (Schneider-Corey & Corey, 2006). The view that good group facilitation can be realised by selecting activities without a clear rationale for how they will help the group was debunked by the facilitator educators in my study (Thomas, 2007) and discredited by other authors in the facilitation literature (Ghais, 2005; Hunter, Bailey, & Taylor, 1999; Jenkins & Jenkins, 2006). In the absence of some guiding underlying principles it would be lucky if the strategies and activities chosen or recommended by a group facilitator lead to the successful attainment of a group's purpose. Facilitators that practice in such a manner increase the likelihood of contributing to a group's frustrations and ineffectiveness. This can be avoided if facilitators are careful to ensure that there is constructive alignment between the activities selected and the group's identified purpose.

Facilitator contributions to problem 2: Low facilitator self-awareness

Leading a group is demanding. Amongst other things the facilitator has to monitor the behaviour and contributions of participants, listen deeply, and choose if and when to intervene to keep the group focused on achieving its purpose. A facilitator's ability to function effectively is partly determined by his or her ability to remain attentive, open, and awake to the group while attending to the sayings and advice from what Jenkins and Jenkins (2006) describe as their *interior council*. Jenkins and Jenkins encouraged facilitators to be aware of the "voices in their heads" offering guidance and then wisely select which ones to pay attention to and which ones to ignore. A facilitator that is unable to do this in real time while working with a group, will find it very difficult to maintain high levels of free attention (Hunter, 2007) and avoid becoming defensive when they encounter resistance or hostility.

There are numerous examples in the group facilitation literature lending support to the idea that leading groups is as much about who the facilitator is *being*, as it is about what they are *doing*. For example, Hogan (2002) enumerated the importance of relationships and the need for group

facilitators to be *fully present* and authentic with group members. Similarly, Ghais (2005) explained that no amount of brilliant skills and techniques will help a group facilitator if they lack personal awareness and "whether we're aware of it or not, our inner states, moods, attitudes, and thoughts are always on our sleeves" (p. 14). Jenkins and Jenkins (2006), also concurred with this view:

The most difficult thing any facilitative leader can do is master himself or herself. Every leader experiences doubt, anxiety, cynicism, and his or her own dark side. Facilitative leaders need to restore their personal energy, maintain respect for both colleagues and themselves, find new sources of ideas and inspiration, and battle the human propensity toward self-limitation, caution, mediocrity, and dependency. (p. 1)

Ringer (2002) explained that effective facilitation is "not about control of the group or dazzling with knowledge or skill, but simply maintaining your self fully present with the group and providing appropriate support for the group to achieve its goal" (p. 18). Ringer (2002) encouraged facilitators to pay close attention to the complex mix of feelings, thoughts, actions, and memories that make them who they are. Hence, according to these authors and the facilitator educators in my study (Thomas, 2007), effective group facilitators require high levels of self-awareness. If a facilitator lacks such awareness they may unknowingly contribute to group problems. Effective group facilitators must be able to monitor their own reactions to group processes and group participants. Without this awareness and perspective they can contribute to defensiveness and over-reactive communication.

Schwarz (2002) provided a useful conceptual framework to help facilitators understand what happens internally when they are faced with challenging situations with groups. His approach, based on the work of Argyris and Schön (1996), used the concept of *theory-in-action* to explore what guides a facilitator's interventions. According to Schwarz, *espoused theory* describes how a facilitator says he or she would like to act in a given situation. In contrast, *theory-in-use* is what actually ends up guiding a facilitator and it can quickly and powerfully influence how a facilitator interacts with a group, typically outside his or her level of awareness. Facilitators are especially susceptible to this when they find themselves in an embarrassing or tough situation with a group, and they can unknowingly be guided by their theory-in-use when they feel threatened or uncomfortable. In such situations facilitators typically become very controlling as they impose their perceptions of the group and attempt to minimise the expression of negative feelings to avoid conflict or further loss of control, whilst espousing the need for rationality (and particularly, their version of rationality) (Schwarz, 2002). The facilitators behaviour becomes guarded and controlling, which can lead to misunderstanding, conflict, mistrust, limited learning and reduced effectiveness and satisfaction. Hence, when a facilitator lacks the self-awareness to notice what is going on internally, they can be susceptible to controlling behaviours and over-reactive communication.

Facilitator contributions to problem 3: Mismanagement of power

Most group facilitators would not deliberately set out to misuse the power associated with their role. However, Kirk and Broussine (2000) warned, "facilitation can become part of a system of oppression and perpetuation of dependant relations, with facilitators becoming unwitting agents of manipulation and managerialism" (p. 14). Protestations of neutrality show either naiveté or cleverness by the facilitator; there will always be tensions around whose interests the facilitator should serve – the group's, the manager's, the organisation's, or the

person who contracted them (Kirk & Broussine, 2000). Similarly, Warren (1998) argued that effective group leadership requires facilitators to be more conscious of how their methods can advance or impede social justice. She is critical of facilitation training that focuses only on techniques and she suggested that emerging facilitators must also focus on the "social and cultural backgrounds . . . and the way their locations in privilege or marginality affect how they teach and facilitate" (p. 23).

Kirk and Broussine (2000) identified four positions of facilitator awareness that facilitators may find themselves in when they work with groups. The articulation of these four positions was intended to help facilitators to "consider and review continuously our efficacy, political engagement and our ethics in our work with groups and organisations" (p. 17). The four positions identified are: *partial awareness – closed, immobilised awareness, manipulative awareness, partial awareness – open*. The position most relevant to this section is the partial awareness – closed position where facilitators: are unaware or closed to fact that their awareness of the group is limited and incomplete; is unaware of the of interpretative lenses through which they see the world, denies the potential abuse of power, is unaware of group pressures on them as facilitators, and is unaware of the influence of the contracting party on them. In an acerbic critique, Kirk and Broussine claimed the "naiveté of such a position does not excuse its incompetence" (p. 18).

Mindell (1995) used the term *rank* to describe the "conscious or unconscious, social or personal ability or power arising from culture, community support, personal psychology and/or spiritual power" (p. 43). All facilitators have some form of rank, but some are more consciously aware of their rank than others and Mindell's concern is that when a facilitator is "heedless of rank, communications become confused and chronic relationship problems develop" (p. 49). In terms of group structure facilitators can contribute to the abuses of power when they are unaware of their rank or when they fail to acknowledge the political pressures they may be facing when working with a group. Some examples include: when a facilitator panders to the agenda of some group members over others because of pressures he or she feels but doesn't acknowledge, or when a facilitator makes assumptions about participants based on their ethnicity, race, gender or other characteristics; or when a facilitator ignores the potential impact of their maleness or whiteness on female or indigenous participants.

WHAT FACILITATORS CAN DO

The previous sections highlighted how and why facilitators can contribute to the some specific problems that groups can experience. These situations can be avoided by participating in a comprehensive, balanced program of facilitator education. Specifically, intentional, person-centred, and critical facilitator education can help a facilitator to avoid contributing to the three problems identified by helping them to *facilitate intentionally, develop high levels of self-awareness, and increase awareness of power and rank*. Hence facilitators can: 1) avoid having unclear purposes and misaligned activities by facilitating intentionally; 2) avoid defensive and over-reactive communication by developing high levels of self-awareness; and 3) avoid abuses of power by increasing their awareness of power and rank.

Solutions to problem 1: Facilitate intentionally

Facilitators act intentionally when they are conscious of what they are doing and why they are doing it. They demonstrate this intentionality through the dialogue used, through an awareness of the group process, by making otherwise hidden processes explicit, by encouraging an awareness of personal stances, and by modeling desired behaviours (Brockbank & McGill, 1998). Robson and Beary (1995) explained that many theories underpin good facilitation practice, and those theories can be used to guide and justify a course of action and predict likely outcomes. The *Skilled Facilitator Approach* developed by Schwarz (2002; 2005) is a good example of a theoretically sound approach to facilitation based on a set of core values, assumptions, and principles. His approach attempts to integrate theory and practice and he argued that facilitators should be able to provide reasons for doing what they do. Using a skill, or adopting a strategy, without an understanding of the corresponding rationale is problematic – particularly when working with a challenging group. The exponents of explicit intentional facilitator education argued that practitioners who are unable to provide rationales for their practice are disempowered.

The facilitator educators in my study (Thomas, 2007) agreed that there is a need for facilitators to be intentional, although there were differences in how they encouraged their emerging facilitators to practice in this way. One facilitator educator preferred the term *being purposeful*, because they argued the need for facilitators' interventions to be based on conscious purpose. Others agreed that good facilitation is about choosing practices consciously, guided by values and principles, and that facilitators need to have good reasons for the actions they take with groups. Personally, I think the terms intentional and purposeful mean much the same thing and the commitment to these principles demonstrated by the facilitator educators in my study was aligned with similar calls in the literature (Brockbank & McGill, 1998; Killion & Simmons, 1992; Robson & Beary, 1995; Schwarz, 2002, 2005).

In summary, the call for intentionality in the way facilitators lead groups is compelling, and group facilitators that fail to heed such advice may contribute to some of the difficulties that groups may experience. However, this does not rule out the possibility that intuitive processes can also guide a facilitator's practice at times; I have discussed this idea at length elsewhere (Thomas, 2008b). I concur with Claxton (2000) who suggested that intuition has the potential to be extremely useful but that the information it brings should be treated as a hypothesis. Importantly, facilitators can be taught how to use intuition more reliably and perceptively, which equates to using intuition intentionally.

Solutions to problem 2: Develop high levels of self-awareness

Before people can facilitate groups effectively they must be able to facilitate, or manage, themselves. Hunter (2007) considered the task of learning to facilitate oneself as the most important work facilitators must do. She described this process as "a life journey – a scary and exciting journey that will take you to places within yourself that will surprise, delight, inspire, as well as disturb, horrify and disgust you" (p. 46). Facilitators must learn to cope with the doubts and fears that plague them and this requires an acceptance of their shortcomings and imperfections.

To varying degrees, all of the facilitator educators in my study focused on helping emerging facilitators develop greater levels of self-awareness and self-management. They maintained that facilitation processes, skills, and tools are built on this foundation because the

facilitator is the instrument of effective group leadership. The facilitator educators were not prescriptive about the frameworks or tools emerging facilitators should use to develop their awareness but they did acknowledge this process of introspection may be challenging. However, the difficult nature of the journey was not considered an appropriate excuse for avoiding this important innerwork. This is consistent with the stance taken by the group counselor education field where experiential participation in group counseling sessions is a compulsory requirement despite the fact that it may be difficult or awkward for the trainees (Anderson & Price, 2001; Kottler, 2004; Yalom & Leszcz, 2005).

According to Schwarz (2002), most facilitators do not set out to be guided by their theory-in-use, it is what happens when they are stressed, feel threatened, or feel out of control. When the facilitator becomes conscious of the values, assumptions, and strategies underpinning such actions there is often no logical reason for behaving in such a manner. Fortunately, facilitators do not have to be slaves to their theories-in-use, nor are they forever destined to low levels of self-awareness. Schwarz recommended facilitators develop an awareness of their internal functioning by slowly increasing the range and length of difficult facilitation situations in which they practice operating from their espoused theory. With appropriate reflection and guidance, emerging facilitators can get better at avoiding reliance on ineffective theory-in-use. Jenkins and Jenkins (2006) described the challenge for facilitators of managing their interior council as an essential discipline for the facilitative leader. They explained it is about developing an awareness of the voices in their head and learning to choose the most creative and enabling voices when they are facilitating.

When you begin to have a profound appreciation of these internal advisors, then you learn to ignore those who dehumanize you or others, and pay attention to the ones who give you courage to be more human. The ones you ignore are not those that you dislike, but those who are not furthering you on your journey. The ones you pay attention to are not necessarily those who you agree with, but those who increase your ability to serve, and offer you the wisdom, skills, and capacity to inspire. (Jenkins & Jenkins, 2006, p. 155)

So, when facilitators encounter resistance in the groups they are working with, they have some choices. They could choose to listen to the critical voice that highlights their inadequacies, imperfections, short-comings and which completely blames them for the problem. Typically, this leads to a defensive reaction from the facilitator which is only likely to escalate the problem. Alternatively, the facilitator could choose to listen to different voices that consider alternative explanations for the resistant behaviours, which don't necessarily require them to take full responsibility for the problem. Advantageously, this allows the facilitator to remain open to the group and increases the likelihood of finding ways forward. This internal dialogue is difficult to monitor in real time but is at the heart of what it means to develop higher levels of self-awareness.

Solutions to problem 3: Increase awareness of power and rank

A comprehensive, balanced program of facilitator education will seek to increase a facilitator's awareness of power and rank to avoid problems associated with their misuse. The goal should be for facilitators to develop and practice what Kirk and Broussine's (2000) refer to as the position of partial, yet open awareness. From this perspective the facilitator is "aware of his or her own limited awareness, actively and openly works with what they think is going on in themselves, in the group and wider system. They will do this vigorously, but cautiously,

realising their own partiality" (p. 20). It is important for facilitators to be aware that power and rank are not inherently bad, nor is their abuse inevitable. In fact, if facilitators are aware of their rank, they can use it to their own benefit and the benefit of others as well. In this regard, the objective of critical facilitator education approaches is not to help emerging facilitators transcend the influence of rank, but rather to help them notice their rank and use it constructively. As Mindell (1995) argued, "The facilitator's task is not to do away with the use of rank and power, but to notice them and make their dynamics explicit for the whole group to see" (p. 37).

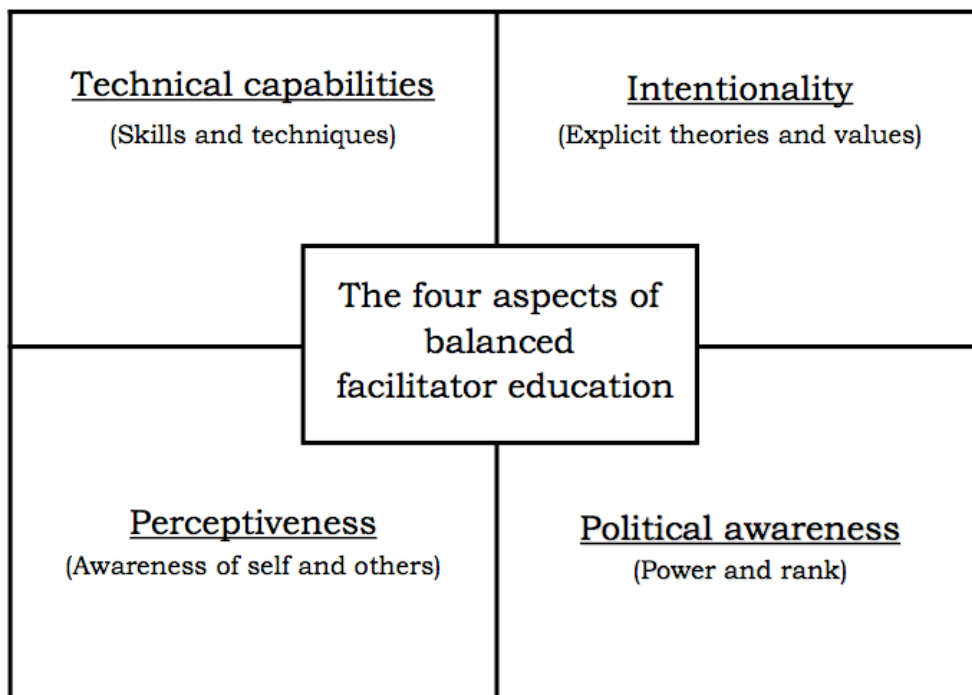
Also, Mindell (1995) called on facilitators to engage in a special kind of innerwork to transform them into "elders who can sit in the fire" (p. 33), which implies that they have developed the ability and self-awareness to cope with hot-spots, or conflict in groups. Without this kind of development facilitators may repress their awareness of group tensions and perpetuate the problems they experience in groups. Similarly, White (1999) argued that "good facilitators are ... committed to empowering those who are weaker, more vulnerable, marginalised, oppressed or otherwise disadvantaged" (p. 9). At a more practical level, Kirk and Broussine (2000) provided some suggestions to help group facilitators to practice with authority and confidence in the context of an increased political awareness. They encouraged facilitators to acknowledge, and be open about, their partial awareness. They also recommend that facilitators develop and practice *reflexivity*, which means "actively noticing in the moment, during the facilitation, what seems to be going on in themselves and in the group, and intervening or not as a consequence" (p. 20).

CONCLUSION

I have highlighted the potential for group facilitators to contribute to some problems groups may experience. Unfortunately, the problems described occur outside the facilitator's immediate level of awareness. However, this does not reduce the negative impacts of these problems or absolve the group facilitator of responsibility. My contention is that a comprehensive, balanced program of facilitator education that focuses on producing intentional facilitators with high levels of personal and political awareness will help to counteract the problems identified. My research and personal experience suggests that a balanced emphasis on all four aspects of facilitator education shown in Figure 1, over an extended period, is critical to the development of effective group facilitators.

FIGURES

Figure 1. The four aspects of balanced facilitator educator.



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