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Elearning Course

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The following is a summary of "content created" as a result of Week 5 of discussions using a non-traditional approach to learning (participants of "elearning noncourse"). This article is best understood as a collage of thoughts, rather than a cohesive essay.

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Introduction

Lecturing, as a means of teaching, has significant limitations. Essentially, the model of lecturing is in conflict with current views of effective learning and with profiles of what today's learner needs/wants. At the root of the lecture model lies the notion that knowledge resides in the head of the teacher, and the student learns this knowledge by listening to the teacher. Obviously, learning (while often including lecture) is much more...learners learn best when given control of the experience, under the guidance and direction of a skilled instructor.

What then is the alternative to lecturing? Facilitation is the "lecture-replacement" process many online and classroom instructors use to foster learning. This process empowers learners by placing them at the center of the learning experience...allowing them to personalize their learning based on needs and motivations. An excellent overview of changing roles in computer mediated learning is provided at: [Changing Roles](#)

What is Facilitation?

Facilitation, in classroom or online, is a process of enabling groups/people to work together to achieve goals/objectives. The following is a list of definitions:

- Facilitation is the process of enabling groups to work cooperatively and effectively ([Info Design](#))
- Facilitate comes from a word which means "to make easy". In the context of group work, facilitation is the process wherein a skilled impartial party supports a group to identify and solve problems by improving group members' ability to work together effectively. The facilitator is called upon to help a group improve its performance in relation to a particular task or project. The facilitator, like a mediator, is substantively impartial and has no decision-making power ([DRC.html](#))
- Quite simply, a facilitator's job is to make it easier for the group to do its work. By providing non-directive leadership, the facilitator helps the group arrive at the decisions that are its task. The role is one of assistance and guidance, not control ([WG Hill](#))
- Facilitation is about engendering an open discussion on a specific set of criteria, where the participants are taken through a series of discussions and activities, to ultimately establish a direction ([Talkforce](#))
- A facilitator is a neutral person who helps a group focus its energies on its task so that the group can make effective decisions and promote cooperation among its members. The facilitator remains neutral and does not contribute her/his own ideas or evaluate group members' ideas. S/he ensures that everyone participates; protects group members, if necessary; and builds trust. The facilitator works with the group to design the meeting agenda and format to produce the desired results, while minimizing disruption and frustration. ([Confluence Center](#))

Purpose of Facilitation:

Facilitation can achieve a variety of purposes, most notably:

1. **Impart new material** -- this would be analogous to the lecture. The instructor either knows something or knows where to find something that the students need to know. It might take explaining or it might only take listing.
2. **Making assignments** -- giving the students work to do, either in groups or on their own, either project based, reading/research, or test/quiz.
3. **Answer questions** -- questions might be directly about the material, might be about the medium being used, or be related to the material but slightly tangential. Sometimes questions can be anticipated and put in some FAQ or archive area.
4. **Interact with students** -- sometimes interaction could be its own and only reward, like virtue.
5. **Critique work or thinking** -- looking over what the students are doing or saying. the critique (positive or negative) might be directed solely at a particular student or group or be used as a learning exercise for the entire class.
6. **Moderate and/or enable discussion** (this is the role of most list-serv moderators)
7. **Introducing or enabling transactions** (the '[Cardinal Richelieu](#)' model. He rebuilt the Sorbonne in Paris, supported promising writers and founded the French Academy. Many French historians consider Richelieu as the founder of French unity, as well as the person who released France from its medieval nature.")
8. **Arbitrating or mediating disputes**
9. **Summarization**

Means of Facilitation:

The boundaries of facilitation have been expanded with the development of Internet/technology/collaboration tools. Prior to the proliferation of tools, facilitation was typically conducted face-to-face in classrooms environments. The following lists facilitation means available today:

1. Static text or graphics
2. Threaded or unthreaded discussion board
3. IM or chat (possibly archived for asynchronous learners, probably according to some type of schedule)
4. Live voice or video, possibly with some white boarding.
5. Links to other materials or lists of materials
6. Email
7. Drop box (a place for people to leave assignments, which could be open to all or just to the person who left it and the instructor).
8. Non-virtual (office hours, phone support)

Facilitation as Conversation

The tacit nature of learning requires a model that permits serendipitous learning and allows for adjustment based on learner needs revealed during the process of facilitation. In this sense, conversation can be viewed as a process of facilitating by allowing adjustment of pace, content, presentation, and clarification.

The following articles explore conversational facilitation:

[Good Online Conversation](#) lists these implications in web conversations:

- Have a clear goal
- State your intent
- Publish and follow guidelines
- Communicate using a cycle of request/respond/reply
- Respect multiple perspectives
- Articulate thought processes
- Co-construct meaning

[Thought Horizon](#) provides a good list of various conversation Types:

1. Conversations for stories and assessments
2. Conversations for clarity
3. Conversations for co-ordination of action
4. Conversations for speculation or possible action
5. Conversations for possible conversations
6. Conversations for relationship

7. Conversations for appreciation / complaint
8. Conversations for second order learning

Online vs. Classroom Facilitation

Are there any differences between online and classroom facilitation? Nancy White offers the following differences:

- No physical clues
- Asynchronous
- Anonymous/disembodied
- Text-based
- Permanent record

Tools

Many software tools are available to enhance the ability for learners to communicate online. These tools can be used to develop, deploy, or directly facilitate interaction. The following table lists some tools that may be of interest to online facilitators:

| Tool | Use |
|-------------------------------------|--|
| Yahoo! Groups | Popular community/group service - email based |
| ezboard | Customized/personalized online communities |
| Zoomerang | Create surveys & solicit feedback |
| Qarbon | Build online demonstration |
| Half-Baked Software | Software for simulations/self-testing |
| PalTalk | Multi-media -video, chat, voice over IP |
| Profiler | Cooperation/collaboration around specific topic |
| QuickTopic | Discussion board |
| CommunityZero | Community software - multi-featured |
| MimerDesk | Groupware - collaborative learning, community |
| Groove | Peer-to-peer collaborative software - feature-rich |

For more information on tools, see: [Software](#), [instant messaging](#)

Roles and Functions of Facilitators

A facilitator plays many different roles beyond simply guiding students. The following links detail some of the more critical functions of facilitators:

[Morten Flate Paulsen](#) describes teaching (facilitating) as comprising of four categories:

- Organizational (set agenda/pace)
- Social (create an environment for learning)
- Intellectual (focus on critical points)
- Assessment

[Ed Hootstein](#) - uses four categories as well

- Instructor (Consultant, guide, resource provider)
- Social director (creator of collaborative environments)
- Program manager (director of agenda)
- Technical assistant (model of proficiency)

[Zane L. Berge](#) - also four categories

- Pedagogical (intellectual, task)
- Social (creating an environment for successful learning)
- Managerial (organizational, procedural, administrative)
- Technical (make students feel comfortable with the system)

Facilitation Techniques

What is Online Facilitation provides the following facilitation techniques/guidelines:

- Assume good intent. Remind others of this simple trick.
- Role model the behavior you wish others to use.
- Practice and encourage the practice of active listening/reading.
- Be as explicit as possible in your communication.
- Don't automatically assume understanding -- ask for clarification as needed.
- Build trust by doing what you say you will do. Encourage others to do the same.
- Trust is sometimes surprisingly quickly granted, but more easily taken away. Encourage an environment that values trust.
- Use irony and humor with care as it does not always come across online as you might have intended. You can always use emoticons to clarify! ;-)
- Think before you hit the button and a post goes up.
- Be self-aware.
- Approach every contribution with curiosity, expecting surprise and wonder

Additional facilitation techniques (relating to organization, social, intellectual and assessment functions) can be found at [CMC Teachers and Their Functions](#).

One of the roles that a facilitator/instructor plays is the person in charge, which means influencing the students/others in the class. A person can influence others through some combination of five different forces:

1. **Expertise** -- sometimes you can influence others because they think you know more than they do, they trust that your knowledge or skill will help them.
2. **Friendship** -- sometimes you can influence others because they like you and/or you have a good rapport with them.
3. **Authority** -- sometimes they grant you authority, because of your position or seniority. In the armed forces, you salute the uniform.
4. **Punishment** -- sometimes it's because they know that you can do something to harm them (bad grades, poor recommendation, firing, etc.)
5. **Reward** -- and sometimes it's because you can do something to reward them (pat on the back, publicity, money, good grades, etc.)

It's not that any of these are definitively right or wrong, the most effective people are usually the ones who can employ any of these at different times, when it is most appropriate (also known as the law of requisite variety).

Conclusion

Final thoughts on facilitation from participants:

"I find in facilitation (both in classrooms and online, but much more so online) that the most difficult thing to get students to do is to really be willing to listen to the views of co-students rather than almost always relying on me. I wonder to what extent my own resistance to doing that influences my ability to encourage students to do it and to what extent I intervene and answer things so quickly that there is little need to rely on each other"

"I think on-line facilitation lends itself to student empowerment more than the traditional classroom. It's easier to "be invisible" and let the students create and affirm their own knowledge."

"All of our instructors have commented that they get much more depth in students' comments via the discussion board (vs. their traditional section of students)."

"I've had many students comment that they felt they had a chance to reflect and think before responding which they weren't as able to do in classroom discussions. I also agree that my sense is that I get into much depth with more of my online students than I was able to with campus classroom students."

"Our biggest problem is knowing how much "teaching" the facilitator is responsible for. We have course lectures on video that presumably deliver the content, but sometimes the facilitator "teaches" rather than "facilitates." And to complicate matters, we compensated facilitators differently than we did teachers (ie adjuncts or faculty). We've rectified the differential in pay, but we still have some facilitators who think they are the sole repository of knowledge. For some, it's a cultural issue that we may never overcome, we just filter them out of the on-line sections."

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