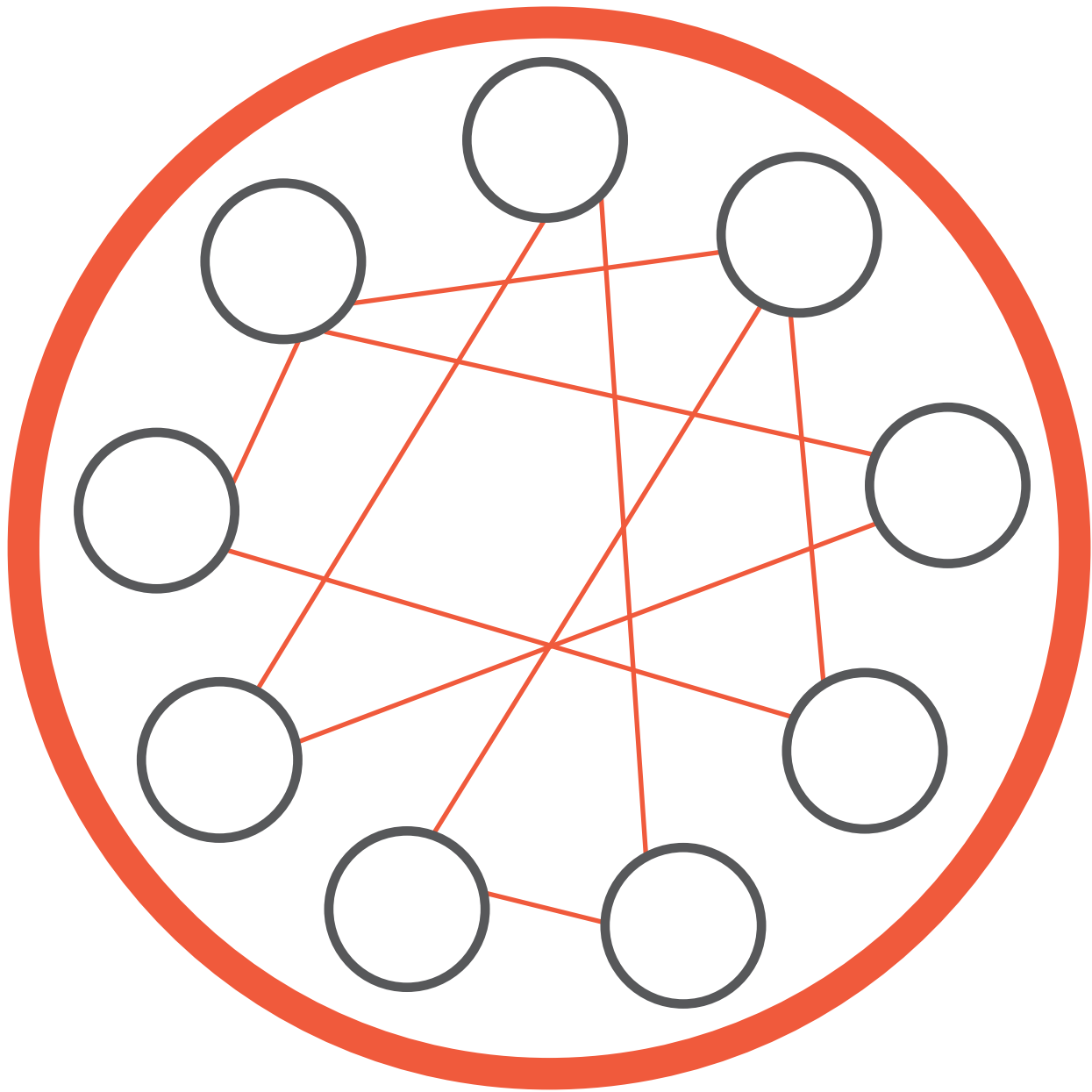


A short guide to

# Facilitating learning



to support learning activities

## What is this?

Facilitation is not just another word for teaching. It is a related, but quite different approach to learning and teaching. This short guide to facilitating learning has been written for those who may not be familiar with the principles of facilitation. For those who are, it may prove a useful refresher or reminder.

A facilitation approach is particularly relevant to activities and subject matter that might be considered controversial or involve different perspectives. This is true of many issues that young people directly and indirectly engage with as they grow up in an increasingly complex world.

The challenge facing young people (and those responsible for their learning) is that the education system many of them inhabit simultaneously attempts to simplify and compartmentalise the way the world is experienced and understood. Where this is incompatible with the lived experiences of young people, there is a need for us as educators to...

*"...recover our command over complex storytelling, to think of tensions instead of incompatibilities, to allow choices and alternatives, mixtures and ambiguities, instability and learning, to counter the false certainties."* (Jeremy Adelman, 2019\*)

## Why facilitation, not teaching?

Some issues and subjects are better suited to a different style of educational leadership in order to enable the most effective and meaningful learning. As our understanding of learning and the brain grows, so does the research into how we can best facilitate groups to learn. At Lifeworlds we call these groups *'learning communities'*. This is rooted in an understanding that learning is often social and communal.

It is important to note that this sort of learning takes place beyond (as well as within) what might be considered formal learning spaces such as the classroom or planned lesson. It is often a sub-conscious process in which we absorb various values, attitudes and resulting behaviours through our social and cultural relationships with family, peers, and the media for example.

Helping young people to unpack learning encounters where formal 'content' is blended with the sub-conscious 'dispositions' that they may bring to that encounter, is facilitation rather than teaching. It is not simply about the imparting of new information, but involves an active engagement with pre-existing emotions, experiences and memories. It may also involve the management and assimilation of new emotional responses as participants are exposed to different ideas emerging from the diverse 'lifeworlds' that are sharing that learning space.

Facilitating learning of this nature therefore requires a set of approaches that should be consciously considered and periodically revisited in order to optimise the potential for learning. The following page shares some of the key areas to consider, discuss and reflect on, in order to effectively facilitate learning.

The six areas for consideration shared on this page are offered as prompts for thinking and reflection, rather than as a checklist of actions. Facilitation is an emergent process, influenced by the facilitator, the participants, the issue, and the learning environment amongst other things. Thinking about these things as an educator (or together with learners) before facilitating a session can greatly aid learning.

## Participation

To what extent are learners freely able to participate?  
 Is the learning environment/culture a safe one?  
 Are learners able to co-shape and co-lead learning for themselves and for others?

## Voice

Whose voices are being heard?  
 Are some voices too loud and how do we turn them down without silencing them?  
 Are there other voices that are silenced or not given space?  
 How might we allow voice for those who do not want to speak?

## Sensitivity

How are learners' real emotions (and this could be a full range of emotions) respected, acknowledged and supported within the space?  
 Are we sensitive to our own emotions and our choices for managing those?  
 What will we do if there are those who indicate they are feeling uncomfortable?

## Openness

Are learners free to express their thinking about the issue?  
 How do we support robust engagement whilst minimising the chance of harm?  
 How might we enable learners to alert us to any harm they experience?  
 Are we aware of our legal duties and safeguarding responsibilities?

## Concern and Compassion (Empathy)

How can we encourage concern and compassion around perspectives and issues, whilst still allowing a full range of expressions to co-exist?  
 How do we develop empathy, but not allow it to prevent difficult conversations?

## Critical thinking

How can learners be encouraged to challenge and deepen each others ideas?  
 What is our role in pushing learners to be more critical?  
 How do we manage the discomfort that going into new areas of thinking might involve?

## Facilitation tips...

Facilitators tend to 'discover their own style' through experience and each would probably give you their own advice about how best to be a facilitator. We have been involved in many of these conversations and using these as inspiration, here are what we consider some essential tips for facilitating learning:

### A good facilitator...

- ... supports, enables and empowers students to lead their own learning;
- ... learns how to '*hold the space*' to allow peer to peer learning - sometimes referred to as being '*the guide on the side, rather than sage on the stage*';
- ... is able to safely challenge, offer alternatives and refocus groups;
- ... helps groups to engage with stimuli and activities, and to use these to share, challenge, build and reflect on learning;
- ... demonstrates through their engagement (i.e. checking, clarifying, summarising, connecting etc) that participants ideas and contributions are valued;
- ... knows that their greatest influence is over the direction of learning (the journey) and not the outcome (the destination);
- ... is aware of '*the power in the room*' (including their own) and how to manage this appropriately;
- ... is able to '*suffer the silence*' and allow time and space for thinking;
- ... can help learners be '*comfortable with being uncomfortable*' and to reach into new spaces for their own and others' learning;
- ... understands that a healthy dissensus is often more powerful than a false consensus (which tends to be determined by the most powerful);
- ... will ensure and maintain a '*safe space*' for learning as an essential requirement.

adapted from facilitation course notes, Rob Bowden and Rosie Wilson (Lifeworlds Learning), 2019.

### A note for the educator!

Normal safeguarding protocols and procedures apply during all learning sessions, including those facilitated rather than taught. Sometimes more open discussion sessions invite disclosures and in these cases teachers must understand and follow their safeguarding policy.

In extreme circumstances it may be necessary to consider withdrawing learners from a session or to postpone or terminate the session for the wellbeing or safety of all learners.