Creative Facilitation

[Online]

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Facilitated by
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The biggest challenge of working online is not the technology. It's about bringing more humanity to online meetings.

And this starts with us.

Contents

Under the hood

We had a plan. And it changed in real time. No surprises there, plans are always being tweaked to ensure we finish on time, and achieve the purpose of the online meeting as described below:

Session 1: *Meetings for human beings - how to create connection and aliveness amongst participants*

> In this session you will learn how to bring the principles of Creative Facilitation online; how to focus on the people, not the technology; and why it's important to have less content, to slow down, and listen more. You will take part in activities that you can easily apply.

- How to get participants to do the work
- Why it's important to get people to engage with each other, as well as the topic
- Popcorn Powerpoint - a novel way to share information

Design

Part 1: Welcome, entry, orientation and connecting (15 mins)
- Welcome by host/sponsor, Acknowledgement of Country
- Zoom tutorial
- Sociometry - poll, physical (arm on screen), 'light it up' - stickies over camera

Part 2: Sharing participant experiences and knowledge (30 mins)
- World Cafe Lite - 3 rounds, 3 different questions, comments in chat

Intermission: Something physical to break the screen trance (5 mins)
- Three Brady's activity - even if people can't properly participate, they are out of their chair and moving
- We had planned to do I Like, I Wish, I Wonder here, but decided a physical activity was more important at this time and shifted the other activity to the end

Part 3: Sharing information while keeping it interesting and generating curiosity (30 mins)
- Popcorn Powerpoint with activities for certain slides (the beauty of this approach is you can use less or more time as needed)

Part 4: Closing (15 mins)

- I Like, I Wish, I Wonder - review of people's experiences of the workshop
- Thank you's and reminder that this is only a part of the workshop - there's the notes too
- Evaluation poll

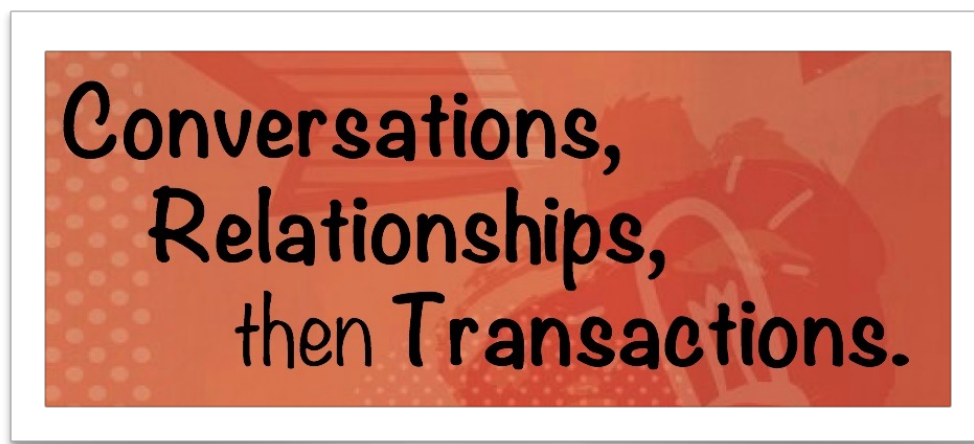## What we wanted to demonstrate, and for you to experience

- The role of an online facilitator is to host: schedule, invite, prepare, show up, set the scene, get out of the way!
- It might be counterintuitive, but breakouts are great for creating a sense of belonging - giving time for people to talk in pairs or small groups
- Conversations help build relationships that lead to more robust transactions
- People are not craving more content online, they are craving more connection
- The value of physical movement - no matter how small eg putting a post-it over your computer camera and taking it off
- The importance of finishing on time, and building flexibility into your plan, with key timings so as you know if you are on track to finish on time or not, and can adjust accordingly
- The benefits of co-facilitating, sharing the tech and hosting roles

What could it be like if you designed your digital facilitation around the relationship you want to have with your participants?

Right now our brains crave ease — yours, your team's, your stakeholders' and those of your participants.

What does it mean to use your human voice — warm, vulnerable and open over the detached voice of an impersonal webcast?

We've discovered that it's important to have big enough questions with simple words that allow space to answer, pause and start again. We try and design for participants to talk together, reflect and play an active role in interpreting for themselves what it all means.

Conversations, Relationships, then Transactions.

Everyone is busy. Everyone is uncertain. Online time is different to face-to-face time. Many of us feel we need to make the best use of online time and skip all 'that other stuff' and just get on with the transactions, decision-making etc. The best, most robust, transactions are built on relationships. And relationships are built through conversations.

It's true face-to-face. And it's still true online.

Here's some of your comments about this;

- Doesn't always happen in that order - focus is often heavily on transactions
- It is central to how our college facilitates because it is the conversations that we have in our classes that values lived experience of mental distress.
- To become comfortable in the space before progressing with the agenda.
- Slide 18 encompasses aspects of presentations
- Input gives outcomes
- Conversations create relationships which allow transactions to flow thereby creating a productive meaningful experience
- The first two words are very often skipped
- Helps develop trust
- Take time to get into the flow
- They read as ingredients Building connection
- Establishing connections with participants

- Getting to know people through discussion, listening, asking through chat for contact details, forming an action with person
- Important but harder to do online with limited time
- A lot of interactions are about content driving interactions- action focused- or transactions.
- It's easy to fall back into the habit of transactions- time constraint has a lot to do with it
- Being able to learn fro each other through forming relationships through meaningful conversations
- Creativity
- There is often more of a focus on transactions and less on conversation and relationships in online interactions compared to face to face
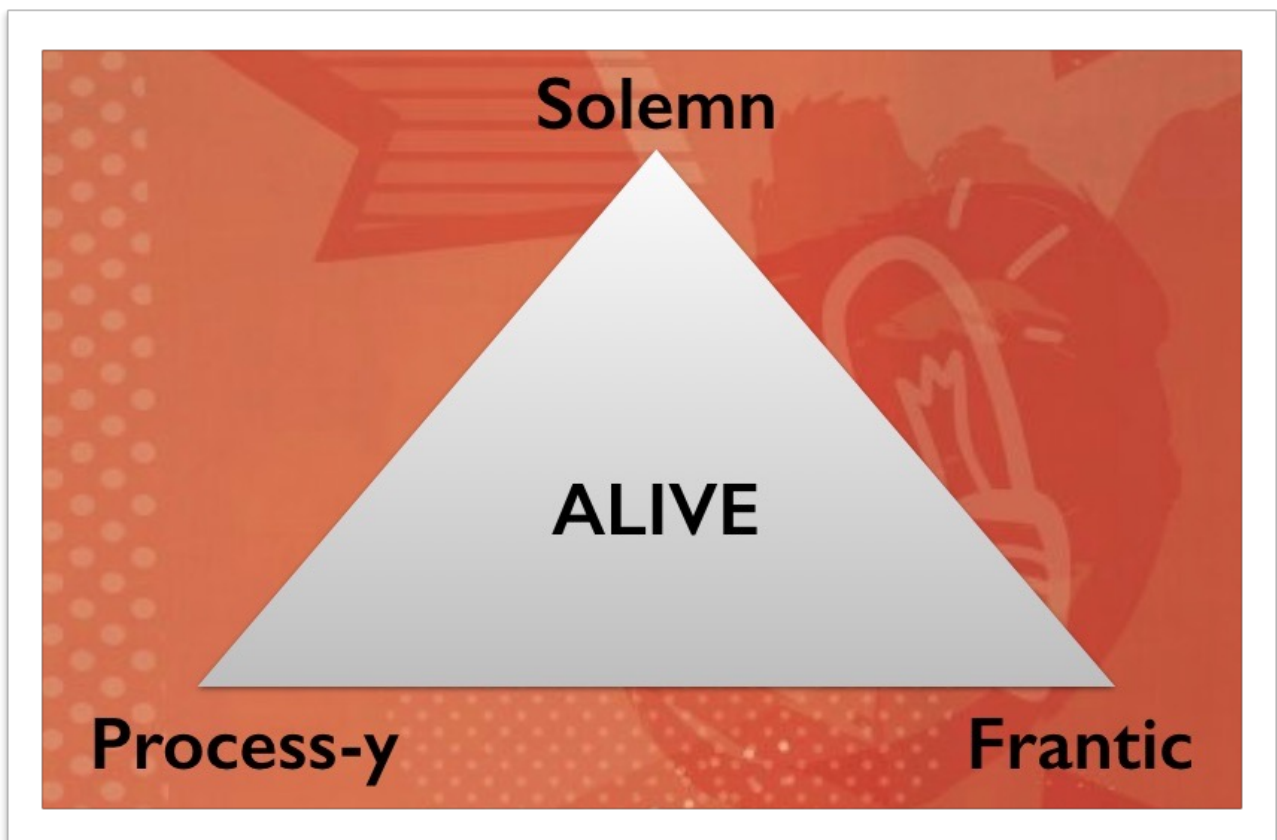- Connections, rapport

Three types of online trance

The Process-y Trance is when you let your process or tech get in the way of conversation. Like when you obsess about some technical glitch and leave people waiting while you flail about, instead of creating a bypass. Or when faffing about with something simply kills the conversation in favour of a feast of boring abstractions.

The Frantic Trance is when you mistake busyness for engagement. Like when your icebreaker runs too long and half your participants are dying inside.

The Solemn Trance is when everyone's being polite but nothing remotely controversial is said. Or when that pregnant silence is really just awkward boredom.

Chances are, any online meeting will slide to one point or other on the triangle. Once you notice this, you have a chance to change something. The challenge is to stay alive to what you are doing as a facilitator, and to keep the online event alive for your participants.

Our ten tips for facilitating online

Facilitating online is more challenging because participants are often more easily distracted, and the technology itself can easily become tiring. The job of the facilitator is to bring even more humanity and creativity to the work, not to get mired in the latest technological tricks.

1. Don't force it all online
There's only so much you can do with a group online before fatigue sets in - for the participants and the facilitators - especially given what else is going on in the world, our communities, and our families. We think a combination of synchronous (at the same time, together) and asynchronous (individual, self-directed in your own time) working and learning will become more common. What won't work is trying to force everything you did in a real-world meeting into an online meeting.

2. Don't use meetings to shovel content at people
A good online meeting is not one person presenting for 20 minutes with 30 increasingly bored listeners, many of whom have started doing their emails after 5 minutes. Our principle of not bombarding people with data applies even more strongly online.

3. Online was made for co-facilitating
Co-facilitating online is a must. You need at least one other person who can keep an eye on the tech, but we try and share the actual facilitating too.

4. Online multiplies the risks of teaching trance
Someone asks a question. A perfectly reasonable thing to do. The facilitator answers. A conversation develops between the questioner and the facilitator, while everyone else observes politely or checks their emails. It's even worse if it's a technical question. Equivalent to asking a presenter how the data projector works. Deadening.

5. Breakout or die
Smaller breakouts - and lots of them - will do wonders for energy levels. The plenary vortex is twice as treacherous online.

6. High tech, high touch
Just because you're using clever technology, don't forget the most valuable resource is human intelligence. Don't get people mesmerised by fiddling with screens and keyboards. Cluttered "whiteboards" can create the sizzle of participation but are often noisy and confusing. Allow your meetings to have visceral life, with movement, surprise and emotion.

7. Shift your focus

You don't need to make people spend the whole meeting staring at their screen. Create a reflective activity they can do away from their computer, perhaps using pen and paper to create a different state. Have them find an object in their workspace and use it as a prompt for sharing something about themselves. Create exercises for people to stand and move in and out of screen according to their answer to a question. Maybe get people to wave hands and gesticulate strongly to take their turn in a meeting, it gets them more physically active.

8. Just because you can doesn't mean you should

We've lost count of the number of times the facilitator has said "now just open xyz" and then launches into an activity, and someone pipes up and says "I'm lost". While opening multiple pages, different browsers, and different platforms might be clever and engaging, the opposite might also be true. Proceed with caution.

9. Put even more love into offline materials

Because you can't risk over-loading your online meetings, you need to get creative and caring about the content you share before and after the meeting. You can no longer get away with a badly written document or powerpoint that you can use valuable meeting time to explain. What you send out needs to be appealing and engaging.

10. The paradox of fixed *and* fluid

It might seem incongruous to suggest you be both fixed *and* fluid when facilitating online. You can be clear (fixed) about **what** you will be doing online, and fluid about **how.**

Connecting with sociometry

Sociometry is about measuring individual relationships in a group. People are invited to make individual choices according to their own assessment, as a part of the group. Can be used as a warm-up, needs assessment, evaluation, team building, communication, reviewing and closing. We think some form of connecting is as important online as it is face-to-face. But it can be more challenging. The tendency is to default to individual introductions which can be tedious at best. You can use in-built polls to ask sociometric questions. Here's what we asked:

How long have you been associated with NCOSS

      Less than one year

      1 – 5 years

      More than 5 years

      I'm not associated with NCOSS

For what reasons would you be facilitating online? (select as many that are relevant)

      To share information

      To find out what others think

      To make decisions

      To resolve issues

      To generate new ideas

      To have difficult conversations

      To train others

      Other

How experienced are you in facilitating (in person and online)?

      I'm a complete novice

      I can do a bit, a practitioner

      Others ask me to help, I'm an expert

      Facilitation is my thing, I'm a ninja

We also asked the group to use their arm in a position low or high on their video to indicate response to another question such as 'how much do you enjoy working from home?'

Identity - Connection - Action

When people come into a group they want to be identified as an individual and acknowledged for who they are; they want to know the existing connections in the group; and they want to move into action relevant to the purpose of the meeting. Sociometry helps fulfil these needs. The activity *I Like…I Wish…I Wonder…* is another sociometric-type approach.

World Cafe Lite

People discuss a topic of importance in small groups, over three timed rounds. This is a modified version of the World Cafe process. World Cafe Lite is a great process to use when you have a topic where there are a lot of different views and/or experiences and you want people to warm-up to the topic or making a decision in small groups.

Round 1: In pairs, people dicussed *What are your experiences of online facilitating - the good, the bad, and the ugly?*

Round 2: In random groups of 4 (for 8 minutes) people discussed *What makes an online experience memorable?*

Round 3: In new, random groups of 4 (for 8 minutes) *What can we do as facilitators to bring online experiences alive for participants?*

After this final round we asked you to put responses into the chat. Here's what you said:

- Break the monotony with a dance session!
- Creative formats- online bingo, dance, food theme etc
- Music, dress up, exercise
- Use pictures in presentations rather than words, make talking points and ask opinion from others.
- Ask people to keep their camera on.
- meaningful questions where people can make real connections with one another
- To create surprises
- Brief breakout groups with a connection activity
- Open with humour :)
- Find creative ways to engage and connect people
- Use pictures, ask engaging questions, smaller discussions in breakout sessions
- Have a great sense of humour
- Google brainstorms
- Do something physically connecting with people...eg, paint a rock together, cook together, dance
- Games to encourage response from participants
- Learning new cultural dance
- To be more interactive - audience participation - use platform features
- Trivia - relevant to the information presented and fun facts.
- Creativity through each participant doing a drawing as a response to a group question; presence and connection through deep listening
- Kahoot! quizes
- Theme eg hats; intermission breaks eg video clip or survey or funny relevant youtube clip
- Get people engaged and doing things. Ask good questions.
- Cooking, using this instead of PPT, coproduction trials

Popcorn Powerpoint

A presentation is so ubiquitous that it is an expected part of any workshop or training.

Popcorn Powerpoint uses the principle of audience suggestions from improv theatre. In a deck of 20 - 50 numbered slides, the presenter goes to numbered slide called out by an audience member and speaks about that slide. It encourages story telling by the presenter, keeps them 'alive' to the content, and raises curiosity amongst the audience about what has been 'missed.

Popcorn Powerpoint avoids you deciding what's important and what's not (you do anyway by choosing the slides – it's just that you have to let go of most of them). It also helps avoid the 'curse of knowledge' and wanting to share everything you know about a topic. And it avoids being too linear – especially when the topic is complex (and most topics are). It adds an extra element of interest to the audience, and keeps you, the presenter, ready to respond to whatever emerges. It also takes way less time than your usual presentation.

Someone quipped it would avoid all that time preparing for a presentation. Um, not so. You do need to be prepared to speak to whatever slide comes up. As improvisers keep reminding us, improvising is not the same as winging it. The process of selecting images and thinking about why it was important to my topic helped focus my mind, and my message. And that has to be good, right?

When to use/not use Popcorn Powerpoint
Popcorn Powerpoint can work just as well online. It is best avoided if you have specific, detailed and sequential instructions that it is important for everyone to follow, for example, the safe use of a chainsaw.

Here are some ways we have used Popcorn Powerpoint:
- For individuals to introduce themselves
- To elicit stories from the audience about well-known local landmarks
- When the topic is big and there's lots to share
- When we are unsure how much time we will have - it's easy to increase or decrease the amount of time using Popcorn Powerpoint
- And we've even used it to signal the start of a new session, with a couple of slides each time, hence eventually covering all the slides

The value of loose ends

Inspired by Russian psychologist Bluma Zeigarnik: The Zeigarnik Effect

In Monty Python's Life of Brian, the eponymous antihero is fleeing a brigade of Roman soldiers. In his panic, he falls from a ledge into a spot where a variety of zany religious types are preaching to would-be followers. Brian nervously delivers a sermon in the hope of blending into the background and eluding his pursuers.

He's not very good. The crowd challenge the details of his story, and the more stressed he becomes, the less convincing his performance. Fortunately, the soldiers pass by and he can relax. So he abandons his story mid-sentence. It doesn't really matter anymore.

But this is just the point at which the audience moves from scepticism to curiosity. The unfinished nature of the story hooks them. As a result, a massive crowd build up, trying to make sense of what's happening, pursuing all manner of hilarious possibilities.

The value in training is to open up people to possibilities. It is the responsibility of the learner to pursue those possibilities. Being incomplete can keep people engaged. (From *Nothing Is Written* by Johnnie Moore and Viv McWaters, available here as a free download) And here's the Monty Python clip if you want to watch that.

Loose ends are even more important in online training than in real life, we think. There's only so much you can do with a group online before fatigue sets in - for the participants and the facilitators.

Evaluation Poll

Here's the questions we asked in the evaluation poll, plus an invitation to write comments in the chat.

As a result of attending this session, to what extent has your knowledge increased around online facilitating?

> Not at all
>
> A litte
>
> Lots
>
> Wow! Can I have some more please?

Have you identified something you could try to enhance your own online facilitating?

> Yes, at least one thing
>
> Yes, more than one thing
>
> No

Has your confidence increased with regards to online facilitating?

> Not at all
>
> Yes, a little
>
> Yes, a lot

Overall, would you recommend this session to others?

> Yes
>
> No
>
> Not sure

Some tech stuff

How to use breakout rooms in Zoom
Breakout rooms are what facilitators use the most. You can control easily who is in which group, swap people and open and close breakouts with or without warning. A built-in timer lets everybody know how much time they have left.

Zoom provides resources + videos
https://support.zoom.us/hc/en-us/articles/206476093-Enabling-breakout-rooms
https://support.zoom.us/hc/en-us/articles/206476313-Managing-Breakout-Rooms

Lee's breakout room tips
- Before a group shows up you can create empty breakout rooms (if 20 people turn up -and you want pairs then 10 empty rooms, or if you want groups of 3-4 then 5 empty rooms). As people enter you can manually assign them to the empty rooms.
- If you want people to have instructions – type these in chat BEFORE you send them to breakout rooms
- Always check Options to see how much time is allocated BEFORE you send them to breakout rooms
- Though if you make a mistake you can always keep the room open when the time is up, or close it early if you by mistake have allocated too much time

And some more general tips
- Expect the tech won't work some of the time. Be okay with that. Smile.
- When setting up for zoom it's useful to close down every other program (saves memory, easier for you to only have to think about zoom).
- Always test something you haven't done before on zoom. I sometimes check things out by using my laptop and my phone and one other person to see that it works.
- If you using PowerPoint for example, set it up ready to go before screen sharing

Is there an alternative to Zoom?
Every day, some new platform is emerging. Maybe that's an exaggeration, but we are seeing a proliferation of online platforms. It can be mind-boggling. Here's a couple that are interesting:

> VideoFacilitator as an alternative to Zoom (includes breakout options) Paid subscription
> Free alternative to Zoom called **Jitsu**
> Watch a video here that compares Jitsu and Google Meet NB: Currently there is no free service (that we know of) that includes breakout rooms

Resources

Yannick Thoraval: *[Teaching online requires more than new tools](#)*

> *"Moving classes online asks teachers to change more than their learning material; it asks teachers to rethink themselves."*

While this is primarily about teaching, we think there's a lot here for facilitators too

Jean Paul Lederach (2005) *The Moral Imagination: The art and soul of building peace*

> This is one of our all-time favourite books about how to engage people with difficult problems. The author describes the moral imagination as *"the capacity to imagine something rooted in the challenges of the real world yet capable of giving birth to that which does not yet exist"*.

Steven Rogelberg (2019) *The Surprising Science of Meetings*

> Actual research that backs up many of the claims we make about Creative Facilitation! - with practical tips for improving meetings. And while the research is based on face-to-face meetings, much of it is relevant to online as well.

Priya Parker: *[We're using the mute button all wrong](#)*

> *"The blanket norm of mute-unless-you're-speaking is crippling our virtual group interactions. You make a joke, and there's no audible laughter because everybody's on mute. A colleague shares an idea and it's met with pin drop silence because everyone's on mute...In trying to keep very real distractions out of our virtual gatherings, we are throwing the baby of intimacy and connection out with the bathwater of (perceived) noise."*

About Creative Facilitation

Creative Facilitation was founded by Johnnie Moore, UK, and Viv McWaters, Australia. We support change and innovation in organisations by hosting better meetings and supporting more effective conversations.

We use a wide range of processes, including many we've invented ourselves, to help groups get the most out of their time together. However, we'd say the most important thing is our ability to respond flexibly to what is happening live, in the moment. For us, facilitation is a craft rather than a science - our clients come back to us because they know we can be trusted to bring presence, curiosity and appropriate playfulness to the most difficult challenges.

Download our free books

Creative Facilitation
Nothing is Written: Learning is an Adventure
Bring Your Meetings to Life: A Guide for Community Groups

You can also sign up to receive our regular newsletter, with a single snippet of interest in each fortnightly issue.

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