Facilitation Methodology

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The Facilitation Methodology is a tool to help a faculty member prepare for, facilitate, and assess a learning activity/process/learning experience. This methodology is helpful in situations in which one needs to shift from being a "sage on a stage" to being a "guide on the side." Examples of such situations include teaching students in a classroom, administering a grant project, chairing a department, and running a faculty development event. Faculty members have found increased confidence as facilitators with improved learning outcomes by following the Facilitation Methodology. The vital role of assessment appears as a thread throughout the methodology and the importance of defining learning outcomes, setting up the activity, and providing closure is emphasized. Additional modules discuss facilitation issues and tools.

Facilitation Methodology

Table 1 presents the Facilitation Methodology, which is applicable when one facilitates an activity, a process, or any learning experience.

Table 1   ***Facilitation Methodology***

1. Define the key measurable outcomes.
2. Design and prepare for every activity.
3. Decide which strategies, processes, and tools are appropriate for each specific activity.
4. Pre-assess to determine participants' readiness.
5. Set up each specific activity.
6. Release individuals/teams to pursue the activity.
7. Assess team and individual performances.
8. Provide constructive interventions based on process, not content.
9. Bring all the individuals and/or teams back together at the conclusion of the activity.
10. Provide closure with sharing of collective results.
11. Use various forms of assessment to provide feedback on how to improve everyone's performance.
12. Plan for follow-up activities.

Simple Example of the Methodology

The context for this example is a classroom activity taking place at the beginning of a semester or term. Students are put in teams where they introduce themselves and begin the process of building a new learning community.

1. **Define the key measurable outcomes**. Help each group member begin to recognize the special qualities of each other community member. Make the first team activity a confidence-building one. Emphasize the fact that learning is fun and everyone is accountable for their own learning.

2. **Design and prepare for the activity**. Decide to have each pair of team members introduce themselves, sharing their goals and learning styles with their partner; and then each introduce their partner to the team. Preparation involves deciding the team composition and identifying interview questions.

3. **Decide what is appropriate for each specific activity**. As described in Step 2, use a pair-share interview style activity. Team roles are not needed.

4. **Pre-assess and determine participants' readiness**. Determine that all basic needs have been taken care of (such as registration, food, and materials) so the participants can focus on the activity.

5. **Set up each specific activity**. Describe the purpose and expectations for the activity. If there are an odd number of people on any team, describe a round-robin interview style. Specify the time limits, e.g., twenty minutes.

6. **Release teams to pursue the activity**. Start the team interview process.

7. **Assess team and individual performances**. Walk around and listen in on each team to make sure that the pairs are engaged, asking relevant questions that focus on the interview process, and making sure that each pair is making sufficient progress.

8. **Provide constructive interventions**. If teams are falling behind, ask if they are going to finish on time. If teams finish early, suggest additional tasks, such as choosing a team name.

9. **Bring teams back together at the conclusion of the activity**. Announce in your own style that it is time to bring closure to the activity.

10. **Provide closure**. Have each person identify and share a goal and a characteristic of their interview partner.

11. **Provide feedback**. Conduct a three-minute discussion of how people feel about the community that has been created.

12. **Plan for follow-up activities**. Collect interview sheets and prepare a group directory.

Discussion of the Methodology

Note that Steps 1-3 should be done prior to the event. Step 4 should be done either before or at the start of the event. Steps 5-11 should be done during the event and Step 12 should be done after the event.

Step 1—Define the key measurable outcomes.

This step is absolutely essential and the one most often omitted. When defining these measurable outcomes (two or three are sufficient), assess what your students need most in order to improve their learning performance. Avoid "over-scoping" what can be accomplished in the given time frame. Outcome-based learning is a very popular concept in higher education today, because if teaching cannot be assessed against a set of outcomes, its effectiveness cannot be measured, and therefore it cannot be improved (Astin, 1985).

Step 2—Design and prepare for every activity.

At this stage one must choose an activity that will help achieve the learning outcomes from Step 1. It is important to think carefully about what the designer of the activity was trying to accomplish. Be sure to plan for contingencies that may arise during the facilitation. What individual or team behaviors are expected? Determine which two or three learning skills will be focused on and assessed during the activity. Make sure the activity resources can be provided.

Step 3 —Decide which strategies, processes, and tools are appropriate for each specific activity, including the roles for participants (*Designing Teams and Assigning Roles*).

In this step the facilitator must decide what activity format is best suited to engage the participants based on the activity content and meeting the outcomes of the activity. It is best to incorporate at least ten different activity formats during a semester to ensure student involvement, which research (Angelo & Cross, 1993) has shown to be critical to student growth. Note that student-faculty and student-peer involvement have positive correlations with every area of student intellectual and personal growth (Astin, 2001).

Step 4—Pre-assess to determine participants' readiness.

To ensure that all participants are sufficiently prepared to perform well during the activity, it is important to determine their level of preparation and the extent of their prior knowledge about the activity content. This can be accomplished in a number of ways: a quiz, a short written assignment in which they discuss what they know or have learned from their preparation, a set of questions each has prepared from the pre-event reading, or the answers to assigned study questions.

Step 5—Set up each specific activity.

This is another highly critical step during which the facilitator ensures that participants know why they are doing the activity, and that they understand the learning objectives, performance criteria, resources, and general tasks for the activity. Performance criteria should be set in terms of both process and content. It is important that each participant know exactly what is expected, but the facilitator must be careful not to usurp responsibility for the learning by each participant. The extent of the setup also depends on the activity type, from discovery learning, which requires minimal content setup, to lecture, which involves extensive content description and is influenced by the personality of the facilitator. If the use of team roles is required, this is the point at which the facilitator ensures that each team member has a role to play.

Step 6—Release individuals/teams to pursue the activity.

Here we give control to the participants to start working on the activity and strive to promote learner ownership. In other words, participants should feel in control of the quality of their performance and the outcomes they produce. The first order of business for the teams is to set up a plan if one is not already provided in the activity description. One of the resources should always be the amount of time reserved for the activity.

Step 7—Assess team and individual performances (*Assessment Methodology*).

This step involves gathering information by listening to and observing the dynamics between individuals, based on verbal interchanges and body language, and written documentation from the activity; the recorder's report gives clues as to how well the participants are learning the content. The goal is to foster independent learning. Therefore, it is important to plan in advance, identifying the top three to five issues affecting performance. Link these issues with specific learning skills that can be improved and the outcomes from Step 1.

Step 8—Provide constructive interventions based on process, not content.

During this step, the facilitator uses the data collected during the last step to determine when to intervene, but avoids doing things for participants that they could do

themselves, even if it may be the easiest way to remedy the situation. By making it harder to get information from the facilitator and by replying with questions rather than direct answers, you encourage participants to use and develop their information processing and critical thinking skills. Be careful not to intervene unless a team asks for help, because unwanted interventions can disrupt the flow of the team and even cause people to resent of the facilitator. When making an intervention, facilitators should focus on helping participants address the skill or process that is lacking rather than focusing completely on the content. Examples of appropriate times for an intervention include intervening after an extended period of struggling or frustration, when participants' actions stray too far from meeting the performance criteria for the activity, or when there is a complete breakdown in performance (Apple et al., 2000).

Step 9—Bring all the individuals and/or teams back together at the conclusion of the activity.

This is not easy because teams work at different speeds. It may be necessary to assign enrichment exercises to some teams and stop others before they have fully completed the activity.

Step 10—Provide closure with the sharing of collective results.

This is a vitally important step and should not be skipped, even when time is short because participants need feedback. Have the teams share quality performances that others can benefit from as well as areas where performance needs improvement. Identify star performances and areas that need more discussion and discovery. Summarize what has happened and what has been learned, but do not spend time on what participants already know. Challenge them to articulate their discoveries at higher levels of knowledge beyond facts and information (*Elevating Knowledge from Level 1 to Level 3*).

Step 11—Use various assessments to provide feedback on how to improve everyone's performance.

Realize that participants want assessment feedback based on the activity performance criteria that will help them improve future performance. Make regular use of oral reflectors' reports.

Step 12— Plan for follow-up activities.

The written team products should be assessed and returned with comments to each team at the next class. If some points need clarification, a quiz or further discussion may be employed. The facilitator should assess his or her own performance, striving for continual improvement. If the performance was peer coached, the facilitator and peer coach should meet after the facilitation for a mentoring session.

Another Example of the Methodology

The context for this example is a faculty development activity where participants are to learn about using the Facilitation Methodology.

1. **Define the key measurable outcomes.**

   - Prepare participants so they can complete a facilitation plan.

   - Enable participants to create criteria for assessing the quality of a facilitation plan.

   - Produce a model for facilitation that others can learn from.

2. **Design and prepare for every activity.**

In the 1997 *Teaching Institute Handbook* (Apple & Krumsieg, 1997), Activity 4.3 was designed to help faculty understand the Facilitation Methodology, learn to assess the quality of a facilitation, and create a plan for becoming a better facilitator. Expect to spend an hour reviewing the activity and anticipating how it can help achieve the outcomes from Step 1. Focus on the following learning process skills: divergent thinking, analyzing differences, and managing frustration. These were chosen because it is anticipated that the activity will produce wide-ranging ideas which must be worked into a coherent report, a frustrating endeavor.

3. **Decide which strategies, processes, and tools are appropriate for each specific activity.**

The facilitation activity mentioned in Step 2 was designed as a guided-discovery activity. However, students often rebel against too many such activities, so convert to a fifty-minute problem-based learning activity (Barrows, 1994). With this format, the participants are presented with a problem and must establish their own learning objectives and performance criteria. In this case, the problem is to identify the issues involved with preparing and assessing a high quality facilitation plan. Decide to provide them with this facilitation plan as a model. Use standard roles and make use of reflector and recorders' reports.

4. **Pre-assess to determine participants' readiness.**

It seems best to give the activity and background information to the participants to read beforehand. Assess how many have done the reading and their level of understanding by giving a two-minute quiz that asks them

to name the three most difficult steps in the methodology and explain their choices. This will be an individual self-assessment quiz to let the team know the level of preparation of its members.

5. **Set up each specific activity.**

In two minutes, emphasize why facilitation plans are critical to successful facilitation and the role assessment plays in ensuring quality. Give the teams five minutes to review the activity and identify learning objectives and performance criteria; have them answer questions for two minutes at the end of this period. Also, state the learning skills identified in Step 2.

6. **Release individuals/teams to pursue the activity.**

Teams will have twenty minutes (with a planned five-minute extension) to assess the model facilitation plan and to identify the issues they anticipate in developing such a plan for activities in their own disciplines.

7. **Assess team and individual performances.**

Look to assess the three learning skills: divergent thinking, analyzing differences, and managing frustration. Also assess the product: the quality of the facilitation plan's assessment, and the level of issues identified for developing a facilitation plan. Potential problems to be ready for include the perceived complexity of the Facilitation Methodology, and teamwork issues related to time pressure and doing several concurrent tasks, especially the reflector collecting data during the activity and the recorder making high-level discoveries before the end of the activity.

8. **Provide constructive interventions based on process not content.**

Typical interventions to anticipate include reminding learners to perform their respective team roles (especially the reflector), time management, challenging the level and quality of issues, and monitoring the recorder's ability to synthesize the multitude of issues raised.

9. **Bring all the individuals/teams back together at the conclusion of the activity.**

Make sure that all teams have recorded enough to be able to engage in class discussion; make sure they have produced three learning outcomes, two performance criteria, the reflector's report, an SII assessment (***SII Method for Assessment Reporting***) of the model facilitation plan, and five issues with developing their own facilitation plans. If some teams finish early, challenge them to improve the quality of their issues and/or assessment. Give other teams three minutes after the first team finishes.

10. **Provide closure with the sharing of collective results.**

Inventory the top two issues raised by each team. The facilitator will model the process of raising the level of some of the issues presented. Allow ten minutes.

11. **Use various assessments to provide feedback on how to improve everyone's performance.**

The reflectors' reports will be used to determine the quality of the team performance. Allow five minutes.

12. **Plan for follow-up activities.**

Provide fifteen minutes of consulting for each participant working on a facilitation plan for their own activity.

Concluding Thoughts

This module emphasizes the importance of following the Facilitation Methodology during each facilitation performance and highlights three critical steps: identifying outcomes, setting up the activity, and providing closure for the students. While it is true that once one gains experience with some methodologies they are no longer needed, even the most experienced facilitator would do well to step through this methodology when preparing for each facilitation because it is very hard to break ingrained sloppy facilitation habits. When implementing this module it is also helpful to use the module ***Creating a Facilitation Plan*** since the latter contains a template which helps organize the facilitation before, during and after an activity. Taking the time to carefully apply this methodology for each facilitation is both a challenge and an opportunity for radical improvement.

References

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