

Some Guidelines for Facilitators

How do we learn?

One way of understanding learning is to think of it as changing how we understand and interact with the world. This can be a small thing – for example if I learn someone’s name it will change in a small way how I interact with him or her. But, there is a big difference between being told someone’s name and actually coming to know that person. This simple example holds a key to facilitating learning, because telling someone something is not the same as helping a person learn something deeply enough for it to make a difference.

A facilitator should be able to help people learn deeply enough to become independently capable of acting and learning more. This usually happens only when learners need to use information or apply skills presented or demonstrated. This can take the form of learning activities, questions, and collaborative tasks. It happens especially when instructors and fellow participants provide feedback to the learner about how they are doing.

Some key elements of facilitation

Whether training occurs in classroom or online learning, trainers would benefit from using the following facilitation techniques:

- Helping the group to develop a positive and cooperative learning atmosphere;
- Aiding the interaction within the course environment, including between participants, instructors and their use of supporting resources;
- If using technology, making sure it is used in a way that it supports the group’s achievement of the learning objectives.

Developing a good learning atmosphere

Do you hope to build a network or team of colleagues through the training? This will require an atmosphere of teamwork. Do you want people to think more critically about their work? This will require an atmosphere that encourages critical reflection. Will learners work on individual

projects? This will require frequent and more personalized feedback.

While much of the above is related to the overall learning design (your choice of learning solutions and learning activities) there is one additional thing that will be desired in every training situation: a friendly atmosphere that encourages positive attitudes towards learning.

A friendly atmosphere can be supported in many ways. Providing a good course orientation at the beginning of the course is one example. This helps to establish the correct expectations of learners regarding the support they will receive from trainers. It also communicates the expectations that trainers have regarding the level of engagement from learners. A course orientation is also a great opportunity to get the dialogue between learners and trainers started. This ongoing dialogue is very important to keep a positive atmosphere throughout training.

As the course progresses and learners enter the more active phase, feedback starts to play a more important role in terms of maintaining a supportive atmosphere. The feedback can come from trainers to start with, but learners should also be encouraged to provide feedback to their peers. Feedback should be constructive. It should highlight positive aspects and point toward opportunities for improvement, rather than be negative or punishing. Remember that a trainer's feedback should model respectful listening and careful consideration of comments about the work of others. Learners are very good observers and may follow your model!

Towards the end of a course, the dialogue between participants of a course will most certainly change, as learners start looking for information regarding ways to continue their learning journey. By this time, a successfully facilitated course will depend as much on advice given by instructors as suggestions given by the participants themselves.

Finally, we should remember that some people may not naturally transfer their good behaviours and attitudes from the classroom environment to the online environment. When facilitating online training it is always a good practice to remind participants that online etiquette, often called netiquette, is expected of them.

Netiquette - a set of rules, behaviours and attitudes that helps to create a friendly, safe and collaborative atmosphere in an online space. One of the rules is to keep a positive tone in all messages. The social aspect of the course is often important, however it is worth keeping in mind that some participants may not feel comfortable if the social part occupies too much of the course space. This is another important rule. Netiquette applies to both facilitators and learners, however facilitators should take care of maintaining it and take an action if it has been violated.

The following list summarizes some useful facilitator roles for a trainer in supporting a classroom or online discussion, examining the functions necessary to keep a conversation on target.

Opening Discussion

- Announcing the theme and clarifying content and purpose

Setting Norms

- Establishing expectations about rules for discussion forum behaviour

Setting Agenda

- Subtly or overtly controlling the order and flow of topics

Recognition:

- Welcoming participants and openly valuing their contributions

Prompting

- Soliciting comments from participants when they don't offer them voluntarily

Remedying

- Responding to problems in misunderstood context, violation of norms, lack of clarity, irrelevance, or other issues

Weaving

- Summarizing and unifying the discussion to ensure that it reaches a constructive end

Aiding interactions

We know that providing frequent opportunities for students to immerse themselves in the content and to actively perform helps developing knowledge and skills. (See the Learning Activities unit of the WMO Course for Trainers.) So how can trainers help learners interact with the content in the best ways? The key, once again, is feedback. Constructive feedback can help learners see how well or poorly something worked out, help them reflect on how to do it differently, and encourage them to try it again and to see if they can do better. With interactive practice and feedback coupled together, learners can OWN the knowledge in ways they would not as passive recipients of information. Formative feedback is one of the most important ways a training can facilitate student learning.

Similarly, it is frequently argued that effective learning is collaborative and social in nature, and that providing frequent opportunities to collaborate with peers is an excellent way to promote active learning. The decision of what sort of opportunities will be provided for collaboration with peers is made in the course design stage, but trainers can help to facilitate the collaboration during the course by offering support. This support includes careful observation and guidance, especially at initial stages, when the group of learners is still getting to know each other and some individuals may be looking for the confidence to participate. The effectiveness of peer-to-peer interactions is also linked to the atmosphere, as a friendly, respectful and positive atmosphere will foster the development of trust and self-confidence.

Facilitation and technology

The use of technology in training has increased rapidly in recent years. In a classroom we often use white boards, projectors and a variety of devices, such as “clickers,” that can aid interaction of learners with content projected on a screen, for example. In an online learning environment the presence of technology is inevitable—it is already embedded in the format of the course itself.

As a trainer, it is imperative that whenever the use of technology is involved in a course, trainers must know the technology well so that they can help the participants use it properly. So the aim of facilitation here is offering support and guidance. Technology support comes in many levels, from offering guidance on the use of a particular tool – for example, explaining how to access to a conferencing system for participation in a webinar, or demonstrating the use of clickers to provide interaction with the content in a classroom – to the more complex support needed to facilitate a forum discussion or simulation, for example.

Time management

Time management is an important skill for facilitators. They are not only expected to make timely replies to the participant’s requests and keep a good pace for the course, but also support participants to manage their own time.

When should a facilitator/trainer interact with participants, and how often? For online learning, it is good practice to answer a question within 24-48h. In a classroom course, the pace is usually more intense, and rapid responses are more important. However you need to use good sense for your own situation and constraints. What is important is that learners know what the rule is and that you follow it.

How many facilitators are needed in a course? This is a common and important question, and the success of the training can depend upon the decision. The answer of course depends on the type of training and the practical constraints. Here is a partial list of criteria that can be used.

- number of learning activities
- number of requirements for students
- amount of reading and feedback needed for assignments
- level of dedication of facilitators (part-time or full-time)
- the pace of the course
- the use of peer interaction (good promotion of peer interaction can reduce the number of facilitators required, as it does in many MOOCs)
- expected time to respond to various question/message types, for example, approximately
 - 2 questions/messages per hours if some *research* or *additional material* is needed

- 4 questions/messages per hour if the response is *specific* and related to content in which you are an expert
- 8 questions/messages per hour if you are being asked to clarify *general or process* matters
- Language of the course, and native language of learners and facilitators
- Experience with the course and course content
- Many others that you will discover

One way to plan for having adequate facilitation is to think about the expected needs for one student, and then consider the total number of students and the time available to each facilitator. If each student might need 1 hour of interaction per day/week for responding to questions and comments and for grading/feedback, and one facilitator has only 5 hours to dedicate each day/week, then four facilitators will be needed for a course of 20 students.

Typically, more facilitators are needed in a short, active classroom course than in a longer online course due to the faster pace. But in a highly active online course with many assignments and discussion forum requirements, 5 students per facilitator might be the limit for part-time facilitators. For less active courses, one based on lectures or many readings, or one with facilitators dedicating more hours, the number could be 10 students per facilitator or more.

Some closing thoughts about time for facilitation:

- If there is a group of facilitators it is helpful to divide responsible for specific activities. It keeps the workload manageable through familiarity.
- People like getting well-thought out feedback, and don't mind waiting to get it (up to 48 hours is fine).
- It takes time to develop facilitation skills, and especially to develop online facilitation skills. Facilitator time management skills will grow as well.
- In discussions, people appreciate hearing from each other. One comment can positively impact many people even if no reply is made. In an online environment, especially, a lack of response can be disturbing, but it doesn't mean no one is benefitting.
- Favour interactions between learners. It is sometimes better to leave space to learners to reply to each other, or to ask what learners think rather than giving your answer each time. Jump in only if something has to be corrected or expanded.
- It is good when someone has a question in an assignment or email to open it to the whole class, as long as it is not sensitive. It is good practice to make it anonymous. For example: *One participant asked the question _____ ; I wonder what answers we all have?*