

## THE ART OF FACILITATION

2024

I have been facilitating groups of people in creative spaces for about 40 years, which is a long time! Over those four decades my facilitation has changed significantly and it is still changing. I do not have a fixed methodology or system; my approach evolves, shifts and changes in response to my experience. I try to listen and learn from every experience and allow that learning to influence the next thing I do. What is more fixed, is my ethical values framework, which sits at the core of my work, providing a reference point.

### **Being Me**

I have thought a lot about my own identity and my journey into this work and how my life experience has influenced how I facilitate. Understanding myself has helped me to be a better facilitator. When I facilitate I bring my personality, my politics, my ethics, my strengths and my vulnerabilities with me. I can't be anything other than myself. If I try to facilitate a workshop like someone else, I feel uncomfortable and disingenuous.

I am always nervous before I facilitate. The level of my nerves depends on the context. Someone once said '*my voice shakes because what I say matters*'. I have learnt not to fight the nerves, but to accept that being nervous means that what I'm about to do matters deeply. Often my nerves evaporate once I start to facilitate. If my nerves remain, I try to take notice and understand why I'm feeling that way.

I think of my emotions during a session as a barometer; if I feel uncomfortable, vulnerable or shaky, I need to try and work out why. Sometimes it means that there is something wrong in the setup. It could be that I am not fully prepared or I'm under pressure to achieve something that's not realistic in the time or with the size of group. It could be that the group has been let down before or there is a hidden agenda, that I don't know about.

### **Power and Privilege**

People don't talk about power and privilege very much, especially in the arts and cultural sector, where people from privileged backgrounds have a significant advantage. People are often embarrassed or uncomfortable about their power or in denial. I've often heard people say: *I don't have any power!* I don't think there's any point in trying to pretend the power dynamic doesn't exist or in ignoring it.

There is always a power dynamic in facilitation. The facilitator automatically has more power, because they are holding the space and organising things. They might also be the only one in the room who is paid to be there. Often the facilitator has more agency, greater freedom, better health and well-being, more stability, a safer life (and so on) than the participants. I believe it's important to recognise and understand how these privileges affect the power dynamic.

There are ways that a facilitator can invite people to challenge or disrupt power dynamics. Sometimes we use a facilitated process to directly address the power dynamic by encouraging shared leadership, decision-making and participation, inviting people to express ideas and concerns and by holding ourselves accountable to the participants.

It can be a valuable process to directly address power in your preparation for facilitation and possibly in the facilitation process itself.

### **Values**

As mentioned before, all my facilitation work is underpinned by ethical values. I use values as a starting point for planning with and for groups I am working with. I invite participants to interrogate their values and I try to hold myself accountable to the values that matter to them. I believe it's important to turn values into actions, otherwise they can become abstract concepts.

When I am meeting with the group on a regular basis, I often start by inviting them to create an ethical value manifesto; a process by which they identify the values that matter most to them and identify actions that expect of themselves and others in relation to the values. This has had a significant impact on much of the work that I have done over the last two decades, especially the work I have done with people who have experienced forced migration.

### **Preparation**

I often reflect on values as a starting point for preparation, considering the values that most important for the context that the facilitation will happening. Then consider the aims and objectives of the session or series of sessions, so that the session will have clarity.

With the values, aims and objectives in mind, I plan a series of activities, with each activity preparing participants for the next one.

I almost always do a check-in at the beginning of the session, often choosing something creative or a metaphor as a way for people to introduce themselves and tell us how they are. (See a section on check ins later on).

### **Evaluation and Reflection**

I've worked in a lot of situations where there isn't enough time set aside for evaluation and reflection. I find this very difficult, because I believe that we don't learn from experience, but by reflecting on experience. This applies to facilitators and participants. The time to reflect on a session allows us an opportunity to think about the value of and 'take-aways' from the session. A quiet and contemplative time can encourage deeper thinking, that goes beyond what went well or the level of enjoyment/participation.

I have learnt the most about my facilitation by reflecting with participants and my peers. Honest feedback from others has helped me to address aspects of my facilitation that haven't always been positive and that I might not have been conscious of.