

Educating for a change

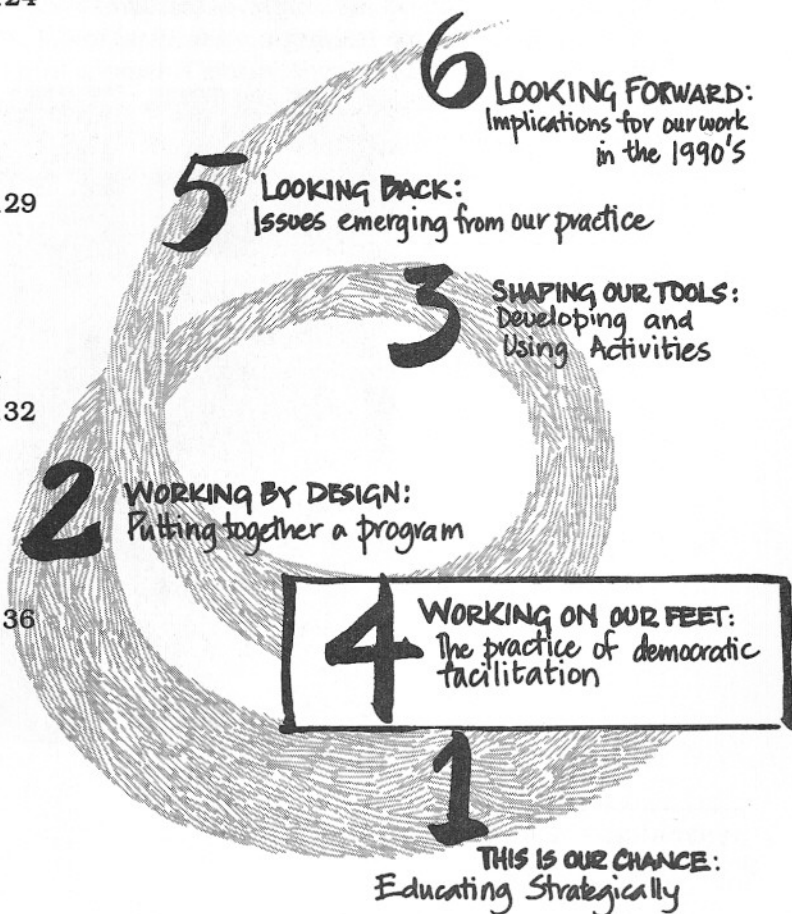


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Working On Our Feet: The Practice of Democratic Facilitation

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So here you are. You're well prepared. But you're facing fifteen or twenty-five people who have differing expectations of the workshop and who want to be there in varying degrees. They see you as the expert but may resent and want to challenge the very status they've accorded you.

They will participate in and resist the process in different ways. They will blame you if "it doesn't work". A few of them – probably the ones who have invited you to run the workshop – may be hoping that you will ring up the political points they've been unable to score with these, their colleagues.

Indeed, as we mentioned in chapter one, there can be many agendas – your own included – operating in one simple workshop. Clarity on where these connect and diverge will help you negotiate traffic, on your feet, and avoid getting bogged down.

After all, the contradictions are the very essence of what you're doing: facilitation. And book after book, it seems, has been written about how to pick your way through this potential swamp. In this chapter we're going to address eight aspects of facilitation in social change education:

- ◇ the use of space
- ◇ making the most of who we are
- ◇ establishing credibility and challenging notions of the expert
- ◇ getting and giving feedback
- ◇ encouraging/challenging resistance
- ◇ working with discomfort
- ◇ dealing with conflict
- ◇ timing.



RICK ARNOLD

We're focusing on these eight issues for three reasons.

First, social change education challenges ourselves and the people in our programs to refocus and reframe "common-sense" understandings and questions about what is happening in our society. It challenges us to consider why these things happen, how they happen, what their impact is and on whom, and what our own location is in these dynamics. In educational work the eight aspects are sites where, in our experience, responses to these issues are played out.

Second, social change education is about developing democratic practice. The eight sites pose some of the most challenging problems for the educator in modelling democratic practice.

Third, mainstream adult education literature abounds with ideas for managing troublesome individuals. But little has been written about facilitator roles in developing critically aware individuals equipped to recognize and resist injustices.

And fourth, we want to affirm conflict in groups as something natural, potentially creative, and necessary in building collectivities capable of working together effectively.

When you start a session there are always some dynamics you can anticipate, and you've taken these into account in your planning and design. But there is a universe of undocumented, on-your-feet experiences that are not only contradictory but also filled with tension, and sometimes painful. We want to explore these swampy places in this chapter.

As authors we are aware of a central tension in this chapter. On the one hand we wanted to make the job of facilitation accessible to anyone attempting it, by analysing its most difficult aspects. On the other hand, the more we probed such moments and tried to illustrate approaches to them, the more we realized that these descriptions might, in fact, overwhelm and disempower some readers.

To this we respond that there is a craft to facilitation, most of which is learned on your feet. While it is true that "anyone can do this", we have found that one gets better and better through experience and through shared reflection with trusted colleagues. It is this shared reflection, at this point in our work, that we offer here.

**USING SPACE:
THE POLITICS
OF FURNITURE**

A story

A union invites two educators to provide training in popular education for some of their staff. When the educators arrive for the session they see a room formally set up with a big table at the front, complete with a microphone, and with all of the chairs organized auditorium-fashion, facing the microphone. (The chairs, they notice, are movable).

Hiding their dismay, they ask if this is the normal arrangement for a workshop room and are told that yes it is and that the union president will be opening the session. They raise no challenge.

The president's opening remarks signal his support for the event and thus provide the psychological space for the educators to move.

After his opening speech the participants wait expectantly for the educators' presentation. After all, the room is organized for someone to present something. The educators, maintaining the given arrangement, negotiate objectives and an agenda. Then they organize the participants into pairs to discuss expectations, after which individuals share their responses and ideas with the group as a whole. While this is happening people crane and twist their necks to see who is speaking.

Next the participants go off to the four corners of the room for small-group work in which they are to develop a role-play. Later, when they reassemble for presentation of the role-plays, participants rearrange the chairs so they can see.

By noon the room looks very different. In response to the need to see everyone's faces in a large-group session, participants had arranged their chairs in a circle, with facilitators as members of the group. At some point in the morning almost every corner of the room had been used.

Before lunch the facilitators ask participants to comment on the room arrangement and to compare it to the beginning of the morning. Participants comment that they like the current arrangement much better. They could talk and hear easier and see everyone's faces, including the facilitators'.

They begin, right away, to reflect on their own use of space and furniture in union meetings. Participants agree that they would have resisted such an arrangement if it had been imposed by the facilitators at the beginning of the morning. They say it would have confirmed their suspicions about the "touchy-feely" outsiders.

So what's going on?

The use of space is a statement about power relations in an organization. In larger organizations, power is displayed by office, window, carpet, space, and equipment allocations.

In a structured educational setting, the arrangement of furniture – conscious or not – makes power relations apparent. It shows these power relations in the anticipation of who will be talking, and who will be listening. While people may, at one level, resent being talked to all the time, they may also take some security in the predictability of such an arrangement, and in the position it affords as an observer. An arbitrary shift made by an outsider to the organization can be experienced as an affront to tradition, to “the way we do things”.

Such feelings, especially when they're fuelled at the outset of an educational experience that is already unpredictable and slightly uncomfortable, can derail the most engaging and exciting design.

Facilitators, then, need to walk a bit of a tightrope. On the one hand they must model the respect for people and their ways of doing things that is the basis of education for social change. On the other hand they must help participants raise questions about how such “innocent” arrangements reflect the very inequities that social change education seeks to challenge.

But if participants themselves are to create democratic spatial arrangements in their own work, they must consciously participate in the creation of these arrangements, in response to felt needs. Any layout favours some people at the expense of others. The trick is to develop skills in assessing and shifting who is favoured. For example, if you have two flip-charts at the front of a room you can angle your body in two different ways for each flip-chart, so you'll favour different people at different points.



ALOK MUKHERJEE

Tips on using space democratically

◆ **Do your homework.** In your planning, ask about the usual spatial arrangements for educational sessions in the place you're going to, and how open to change participants might be.

◆ **Request the kind of space you need.** If possible, see the space in advance or request a full description. Ask about the size, and if there are windows, carpets, and wall space for flip-chart paper.

Ask about disruptive noise. Request an additional room for small-group work; and a lounge for evenings if you're teaching a residential course. Get there early enough to ensure that you get the space you need, and that it is set up appropriately.

◆ **Use your design to shift things.** Use different activities to get participants to move their bodies and chairs and to use as many parts of the room as possible. Share the power to get up and move around.

◆ **Occasionally move the "front" of the room.** Following a group-work activity, get participants to report, using their own flip-chart notes, from wherever they are sitting. If you need to be standing or commenting, move to where the participants are.

◆ **Where possible, use the floor.** Many activities are designed for the floor. (See, for example, one of the variations in "The power flower" in chapter three.) Where there are no tables, and/or where the floor is carpeted, participants will often choose to work with flip-chart paper on the floor, which can also expand the use of space in the room.

◆ **Encourage participants to use the walls.** Activities that require participants to post comments, write graffiti, or assemble bits of data are occasions for encouraging participants to claim new spaces in the room. After an activity you may want to post particular sections of the flip-chart work for future reference in the workshop. Make sure you do this selectively so you won't drown participants in their own work.

◆ **Share the "props".** Share the tools you are using. Avoid maintaining a bank of markers, masking tape, folders, and flip-chart paper that only you as facilitator can touch or use.

◆ **Make the process explicit.** Spatial arrangements are not accidental, whether conscious or not. Particularly if you are training other educators, make time to pose specific questions about the "politics of furniture".

- ◇ Who is set up to talk and/or to listen in the spatial arrangement?
- ◇ In what ways can certain arrangements reinforce or undermine relations of power?
- ◇ What kinds of arrangements assist democratic processes?
- ◇ How do numbers of people, tasks to be accomplished, levels of comfort influence the spatial arrangements we choose?
- ◇ How can education for social change build comfort in spatial arrangements that encourage a sharing of power?

MAKING THE
MOST OF WHO
WE ARE

A story

Three facilitators who work together extensively – one Black, one South Asian, one White – are working with a group of teachers in the second stage of training in anti-racist work. Just before beginning in the afternoon, the teachers discuss who will make presentations to the Board of Education about hiring people of colour in senior positions at the Board.

A Black teacher is trying to sign up different people for the task. The group suggests several people, none of whom are at the meeting. One of the facilitators asks, "Why are you only naming people who are not here? What about the people who are here?"

The group looks uncomfortable, and then a few White teachers suggest that the first Black teacher along with another Black teacher should do the job. The first Black teacher confronts the group, saying, "It's always people of colour who have to do this. If you think it's less risky for us, you're very mistaken. This is exactly why it's hard to trust White people's good intentions sometimes."

One White group member protests "being made to feel guilty". "It's clear," he said, "that you (indicating the two Black women) are more experienced in this than I am."

One of the Black women responds, "What I'm getting here is that even in this group, racism is still our issue. Don't you think we're afraid we'll say the wrong thing, or that this will have repercussions for our jobs? In fact, we're more likely to get nailed than you are."

The three facilitators look at each other. They can see that the greatest discomfort is surfacing among the White participants. It is clear that some work is required with the White participants, while they remain in the large group.

The Black facilitator, who had heard this conversation all too often, signals, simultaneously, her support and her intent to observe. The South Asian facilitator works inside the organization and both his racial and organizational identities make a lead role in this situation problematic for him.

A judgement has to be made, based on trust. A formal time-out is not possible, so in a few glances the situation is settled. The White facilitator moves her chair to a different spot, indicating her willingness to structure the ensuing discussion.

The group spends two hours looking at what is going on. Individual Whites in the group examine what they would want to say if they were to make a presentation to the Board. They look at what made them afraid to do this, and under what conditions they might overcome such a fear. They examine the impact of their behaviour on their colleagues of colour and talk about the requirements for building real trust between Whites and people of colour in fighting racism.

Through all of this the people of colour in the room maintain a watchful distance, occasionally posing questions of clarification and supportive challenge to the White people.

Following the program, many participants, including the facilitators, send letters and attend the meetings where hiring is discussed.

So what's going on? In this story there are three identities: social (in this case racial); organizational insider/outsider; and educational (in this case, transformational educator).

Social identity

Whether the social issue is class, gender, North-South relations, disability, or race, your own location in the oppressed or oppressor group matters. (See the discussion of the power flower in chapter one.)

In this case the White facilitator could have confirmed the distrust of White participants that was building in the room by avoiding the issue or moving on to another item. At such times, even the closest of friends and allies can suddenly feel themselves as "part of the problem" or "part of the oppressed group" – on opposite sides of the room.

At the same time, it would have been entirely inappropriate for the White facilitator to have spoken for or on behalf of the people of colour in the room. It would have been equally inappropriate for her to have focused the discussion on the behaviour of the Black women in the room, when they had taken all the risks in the discussion so far.

But the White facilitator could play a useful role in encouraging Whites to name what was going on and to probe the reasons and impact of their behaviour. As a White person she knew this experience firsthand. As a White person her racial identity did not distract the White participants from their own task of examining the impact of racism on themselves. She could use her racial identity to move the process forward.

There are just as many occasions when it is the facilitator who is a woman, a person of colour, or a Native person who is best placed to address the particular issue, tension, or question arising. Trying to read the signals correctly, to find out when it is best to play what role, is an important part of our work as educators. And this work is essential in building relations with the colleagues we are working with.

Organizational insider/outsider

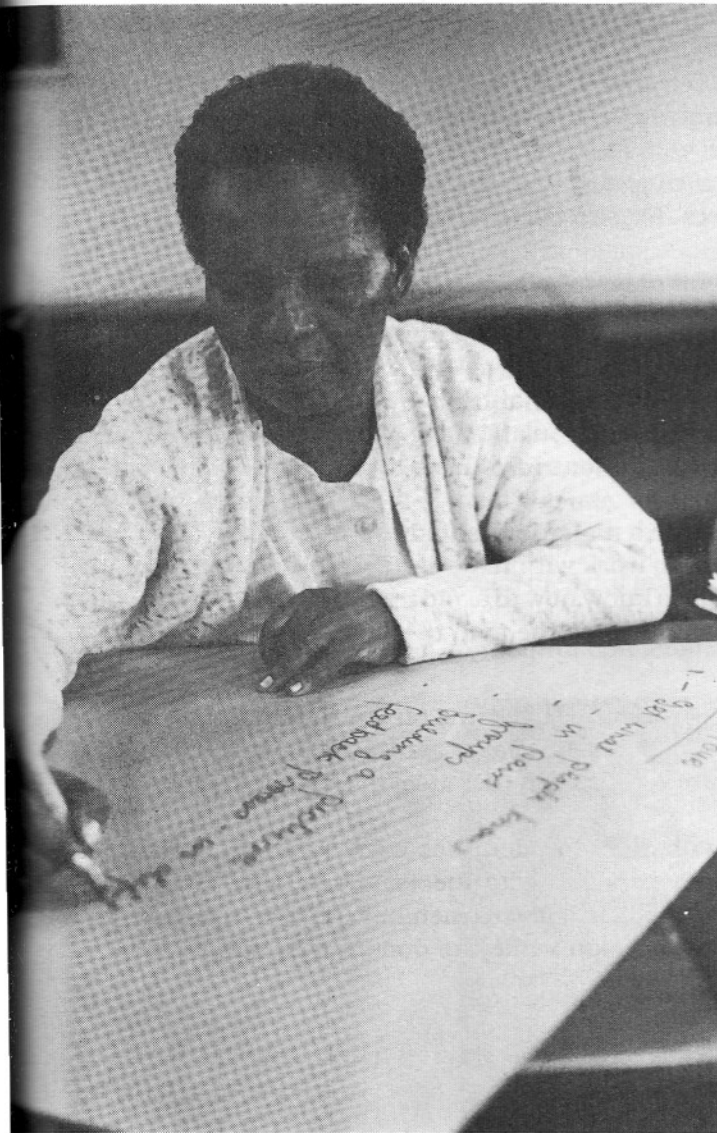
Being inside or outside the organization also matters. Within organizations there are particular risks and benefits in challenging the way things are. Inside facilitators, as employees or members of organizations, share those costs. They can talk from or allude to their experience.

Outside facilitators are not subject to the same constraints and must therefore avoid glib analyses of the consequences of action. They will not bear the penalties. Their clarity about this is essential if participants who do work inside the organization are to trust their leadership in analysing and developing appropriate action.

Both insiders and outsiders need each other. But they must be respectful of the constraints on – as well as the possibilities for – the other's actions.

Educational identity – transformational

Social change educators have a stake in the outcome of conflicts. They are not “neutral” facilitators. For social change educators, participants are often also colleagues and allies. There are times to take an appropriate distance. If the educator is an organizational outsider, the risks are greater for the organizational members planning the action than for the facilitator. As participants weigh both their fears and the consequences of particular actions or inaction, the social change educator’s role is to help them clarify what those risks are likely to be and to help them make decisions based on their own sense of the consequences. The role is not to preach about what people should do.



BARB THOMAS



BARB THOMAS

Tips on making the most of who we are

◆ **Clarify and name whether you are a target of the oppression or a member of the dominant group.** This has implications for your sources of knowing about this form of oppression, and for the sources of your credibility in challenging it.

This does not mean that as a member of the dominant group (for example, men) you cannot choose to fight that form of oppression. At different moments, and in different groups, you may gain credibility for being connected with either the dominant or oppressed group.

◆ **Clarify your interests.** In the case of racism, people of colour and White people are hurt by racism differently.

People of colour are its targets. All too often they are additionally burdened with the responsibility of educating Whites about it. They may resent doing so, and they may be resented for doing so.

Whites are diminished by their inability to locate the ways in which racism hurts them, and by the distrust provoked by their reluctance to take the consequences for challenging racism.

As an organizational insider/outsider, and as a transformational educator, you also have particular interests. These need to be clear to you as well as to participants.

◆ **Name your fears.** If you, as a facilitator, are a member of the target group, you may already fear the sustained and continuing expressions of the oppression you face.

In addition, the labelling, marginalizing, and dismissing of your efforts to bring about change may further frustrate you and have an impact on your work. However, clarity about these considerations in your work can inform and assist others seeking to work with you.

For example, as a woman inside a male-dominated union, you may want to engage an outside male educator to work with male staff on the issue of sexual harassment. This educator needs to know how to avoid making conditions worse for you while at the same time challenging the men to look critically at harassment.

◆ **Seek appropriate roles for yourself.** Depending on your identity as dominant group or non-dominant group member, or as organizational insider or outsider, it may be appropriate to either support the discussion from the sidelines or play a front-line role.

Even when two educators with different identities work together, they can adopt tactics for who does the processing and who injects new content. Avoid, for example, always having the non-dominant group member provide the content and theory about that form of oppression while the dominant group member provides the processing.

◆ **Model equity in your working relationships.** This means constantly monitoring your participation in a program to see if it is reinforcing or challenging inequities.

In your working relationships you can make sure your education team is composed of dominant and non-dominant identities, regardless of the subject under discussion. (Often people with non-dominant identities are sought only for their expertise on the form of oppression they experience.)

Watch that the roles you play in your educational work do not reinforce stereotypes. As an educator on your feet, you will also have to deal with how a group treats both you and one or more other facilitators, and how you can challenge dominant perceptions and practice.

In addition, check which authors are reflected in your readings; who appears, who speaks in your audio-visuais; who has the opportunity to attend workshops; how publicity and registration processes can promote equity.

◆ **Don't freeze yourself into a role.** There are no axioms for selecting when it is appropriate to play a particular role, based on one's particular identities. For example, it may be useful for a White person to do anti-racist work for a while, with other Whites in a White-dominated organization. There may come a time when a more appropriate role is to coach or make way for people of colour who are already skilled in the work, and then move on.

◆ **Make sure your own learning has varied sources.** There are decided limits to what you can know about poverty if you are a middle-class person, or about gender inequities if you are male. Identify the limits and strengths of your position.

Work with colleagues who can challenge you to extend your range, expand what you see, and use your strengths.

◆ **Watch for co-optation by participants.** Some participants who share your social identity may express certain expectations about you "being on their side", or of you "understanding where they are coming from". Use this as an entry point for helpful challenge rather than for unthinking alignment.



RICK ARNOLD

**ESTABLISHING
CREDIBILITY /
SHARING THE
EXPERT ROLE****A story**

A parent-teacher association organizes an evening workshop on the role of the media in shaping children's perceptions of gender roles. They hope to emerge with some actions they can take. A steering committee is charged with finding a resource person to run the evening. One of the members suggests an educator he knows who has done some work on this and who would run a participatory session.

The educator meets with the steering committee to clarify their objectives and to find out about the participants and their needs. She then writes up a brief description of the objectives and the process for the workshop and sends the outline back to the committee for further discussion. They approve her outline by telephone and she suggests a way of publicizing the workshop and doing the introductions.

On the evening of the workshop a steering committee member who had not attended the planning meeting introduces her. He refers to her, briefly, as an educator who has done a great deal of work on equity issues and then turns the workshop over to the "guest resource person".

A parent raises his hand and says he hadn't come to talk about racism, he'd come to "hear about how the media worked".

The educator, a Southeast Asian, suggests that someone else from the steering committee say something about her meeting with them and the planning process. Following a few additional comments by steering committee members, the educator asks if she can continue. After getting support to do so, she quickly negotiates objectives and clarifies the process she intends to use. People agree.

By way of introducing the subject the educator asks participants to group themselves, first by the media they spend most time with and second by the media their children spend most time with. A lively discussion follows, touching on the discrepancies between parents and children in both the form and content of media they watch and read.

After a while the same man interrupts again and says he had come to hear someone who knew something about the media speak about it. He had not come to play games. The educator calmly indicates that she is addressing the objectives agreed to by the steering committee and approved by the group. She asks if other participants feel the same way as the man. One woman states firmly that she doesn't. She says she had half expected a presentation but was finding the discussion stimulating, and she wanted more. Others agree.

The educator points to copies of two articles on the media she had brought and gives the man a copy of each of them. "Nobody wants to waste their time," she says to him. "If you feel you'll be wasting yours, I won't be offended if you want to call it a night and take the articles with you. However, in my experience you can get factual information from a variety of sources. It is analysing what that information means for what we do that is difficult. We can use our time together to help each other with that."

So what's going on? There is a tension between the need to establish credibility and the need to challenge the notion of the expert. Yet to work effectively and democratically the educator for social change must do both.

Let's consider four of the major issues arising from this situation: social identity and the image of the expert; the role of the insider in establishing the credibility of the outsider; reconciling the agenda with participant expectations; and the notion that learning is listening to someone who knows.

The image of the expert

In this case the educator had anticipated difficulty in establishing credibility. These difficulties might have arisen from four primary sources.

First, she was Southeast Asian. In this group, her credentials to speak about the Southeast Asian community, or about racism, might readily have been accepted. The participant's comment that he had not come for a session on racism relates not only to the committee member's unfortunate introduction but also stems from a pervasive perception that a person of colour only has expertise on racism. But the educator's task was to engage participants in an examination of the media. Broadcast and print media overwhelmingly use white males as spokespersons on most economic, social, and political issues. These images are powerful in shaping our perceptions of who is qualified to speak or lead an examination of the media.

Second, she was a woman. It is not clear if gender dynamics were also at work in the male participant's resistance to her credentials. But this is not uncommon.

Third, she was not a journalist or academic; she was an educator with a knowledge of process and of the impact of media in shaping perception. Her skills and knowledge were not readily identifiable through a list of degrees and media postings: the trappings most people accept as indicators of a media expert.

Fourth, the democratic process she was using was unfamiliar to people schooled in sitting, listening, and writing down information transmitted by "people who know". Many people view with suspicion educators who resist "telling people what they know" and begin with a belief in participant experience and knowledge. (See chapter two, in particular, for our examination of this kind of process.)

In anticipating these difficulties of establishing credibility, this educator had written and reviewed with the committee an appropriate introduction to herself that emphasized what she was bringing to the workshop. She had also fortified herself with some written handouts to reassure those who require print to make certain they are learning.

Finally, in conjunction with the steering committee she had paid particular attention to the development of a design and hoped that the committee, with this additional experience of work with her, would be able to communicate her competence to the rest of the group. This form of democratic planning is necessary not just to establish credibility but also to ensure that the workshop meets the needs of those requesting it.

It is also important to remember that members of any group will have different criteria for what makes a person credible. One facilitator may not be able to meet all of these criteria equally well.

Insider/outsider

There are different tensions for the insider and for the outsider in establishing credibility while working democratically. In this case, the educator was an outsider, recommended by one of the steering committee members because of her skills along with her perspective and experience.

She used the planning process to make the rest of the committee familiar with her skills and then relied on the committee to establish her credentials with the participants. It is important that insiders who solicit outsiders to assist in their learning take responsibility for welcoming and confirming the abilities of the outsider to do so; and share the responsibility and the heat (when necessary) for the process.

Participant Expectations

Without belabouring the obvious, if participants attend a workshop thinking it will be one thing, and the facilitator offers something radically different, there will be trouble.

In this case the educator had tried to reconcile participants' expectations with the design developed with the steering committee. She did this through the wording of the advance publicity, through a negotiation of objectives at the beginning, and through referring to the objectives when there was resistance.

This approach accomplishes two important things: it establishes joint responsibility for the design of the workshop; and it provides a framework for common agreement. Any objections can be referred back to this agreement. Even so there is always the possibility that the original objectives will have to be revised and the direction shifted.



BARB THOMAS

Experiences of top-down education

All of us have been schooled in undemocratic learning processes. Teachers teach; students learn. Teachers talk; students listen. Teachers know; students don't.

These experiences inform the expectations many people bring to our workshops about who will do what, and how things will happen. Many people are comforted by having an "expert" at the front of the room. They can afford to be passive; they have someone to argue with, but not necessarily to engage with; they can scrutinize the expert and avoid their own location in the issue; and they can be assured that whatever happens they "are learning something" because someone is talking at them. And some experts can make wonderful, engaging presentations that do connect with people's experiences and deepen their understanding. This is not an argument against expertise. This is a challenge to use expertise democratically, so that the expertise of participants is also affirmed and called upon.

Social change education encourages people to identify, value, and contribute what they know so they can solve problems together. The social change educator must design different processes that actively invite such joint learning and problem-solving.

But to do so requires an acknowledgement that this is not familiar terrain to most people. We find that stating objectives, providing clear structures, and making print resources available are strategies that establish credibility but don't, in themselves, confirm the educator as expert.

At the same time, educators do bring particular skills and knowledge to events – otherwise they wouldn't be doing the work. They have to find the appropriate moments to add content that is new to the participants and to challenge strongly held views that are sexist, racist, or class-biased. Social change education is not an invitation for the educator to be self-effacing. It is a challenge to provide expertise strategically and respectfully.

Tips on establishing credibility/sharing the expert role

◆ **Negotiate objectives with participants.** Facilitators should tell participants about the objectives that inform the design. Allow for enough time at the beginning of a session to hear what individual participants want to learn. Talk about how these wants can be met, what shifts can be made to accommodate particular concerns, and what participant goals are not possible in the workshop.

This process establishes that the educator has given previous thought to the workshop and signals a readiness to accommodate the particular, unanticipated needs of participants. It also indicates the limits of what the process can provide.

◆ **Acknowledge participants who helped with planning/design.** Crediting the time and insights of participants who helped with planning is a clear statement to other participants that the facilitator thought about their particular needs and drew upon expertise from their own ranks. It can also acknowledge that some of the members, in fact, were responsible for drawing up the objectives of the event.

◆ **Speak to familiar aspects of the organizational culture.** Try to use terminology familiar to participants. For example, with trade unionists, you'd say "course leader" rather than "facilitator". When you use illustrative examples from other contexts, frame them in the organizational language that participants will feel comfortable with. When you are not sure about the language or norms of the group, ask them for help. Draw on what they know best: their own workplace.

◆ **Take time with introductions.** Get participants to introduce themselves, along with the particular interest that brings them to the workshop. If you record these comments on flip-chart paper, participants will see that you've heard them and that you respect their knowledge and their hopes for the workshop. If people resist, saying that they know each other already, throw in some surprising or obscure questions (place of birth, number of brothers or sisters) to make sure that they learn something new about each other. (And remember the various activities for getting started outlined in chapter three.)

◆ **Link the print materials you have brought to the discussion.** Ironically, many people who are reassured by the provision of print material do not read it. But they often do read materials after a stimulating, challenging workshop. The use of print material reinforces a facilitator's knowledge of the subject. People are more likely to read it, though, if facilitators link each piece of material to something discussed during the workshop.

◆ **Type up and give back participant notes, when possible.** If you have recorded participant comments, insights, and questions throughout the workshop, try to return this information to the participants. (The recording is best done on flip-chart paper or blackboard so participants can see what they are producing.)

Returning participants' knowledge to them accomplishes three things: it documents the workshop and what it produced and makes this information available for future use by facilitators and participants; it confirms and values for participants what they know and have produced; and it provides an occasion to have further contact with participants following a workshop. (See chapter two for more detailed suggestions about the process of documenting the event.)

GIVING AND GETTING FEEDBACK

A Story

Some twenty women who work in shelters for abused women are participating in a five-day, facilitator-training program. On the fourth day, working in small teams, they design their own workshops and are about to begin practising facilitation. The purpose of the exercise is not only to strengthen facilitation skills but also, following each team's presentation, to practise giving each other supportive, critical feedback.

In preparation for the activity the facilitator helps participants develop rules for feedback. She asks them, "What behaviours help you to hear people's criticisms as useful and not attacking?"

The participants generate a list of guidelines they'll use to critique each other's work. Among other things, they agree that each woman should indicate one thing she likes and one thing she thinks can be improved; that they should all speak for themselves and not universalize their comments; and that comments be specific, not general.

During the feedback after each team's presentation, two women continually interrupt and violate their own guidelines. They launch immediately into criticisms of what was wrong with the team's presentation, without mentioning anything positive. They make comments such as, "Nobody could understand your instructions," implying that the others agree with what they are saying. The facilitator continues to stop the process and question their behaviour in light of the guidelines.

Later, in the evaluation of the session, the two women reflect critically on their own inability to follow feedback guidelines. They name this as a significant problem in their own political organizations. The result, they conclude, is that people stop listening to each other and instead spend energy defending and attacking. Critical feedback becomes a way of hurting others and not building the work.

So what's going on?

Most people think of criticism as negative, and three important social factors encourage this notion.

The first is that in many capitalist societies people are trained to view criticism as having meaning only at a personal level – and not at a collective level. Critical comments, then, become one person's response to another person's skills, knowledge, and understanding. People don't see these comments as an opportunity for everyone to learn something both for themselves and for their joint efforts.

On the other hand, if people adopt a spirit of shared responsibility for learning and action, this step would not only promote more shared ownership of a problem but also help establish a way of developing useful approaches to addressing the problem.

Second, there's a standard response to this personalization of criticism, which is not to give it at all for fear of hurting the person's feelings. It's not uncommon for people to say publicly what they like and privately, to someone else, what they dislike. This produces dishonesty and distrust in groups, and

prevents potentially helpful insights from informing the collective analysis and action of the group.

Third, in organizations that view themselves as oppositional and action-oriented, a culture of criticism often develops that ignores personal feelings. Instead, the strategy and the work are deemed important. Despite persistent evidence to the contrary, personal feelings are viewed as a liberal luxury. This results in the suppression of hurt, anxiety, and anger and helps to produce ways of talking that are, in fact, competitive, aggressive, and non-collaborative.

These processes also suppress more kindly emotions, such as approval or affirmation. A tendency builds up to reduce all differences to political tensions, even in situations where differences in social identity and organizational role may be significant.

A central task of social change education is to develop skills in constructive, critical dialogue. These skills include abilities to:

- ✧ raise questions for clarification
- ✧ probe for the reasons for a statement or action
- ✧ identify and name one's own personal responses to someone's actions or work, whether in accord with or in challenge to that work
- ✧ suggest alternative approaches.

The development of these skills must be planned and deliberate. If, for instance, you build in ongoing evaluation throughout the event you will be providing early opportunities for participants to give critical feedback, which can be used to make changes immediately. This strategy influences the quality of the critical analysis; helps to break down the barriers between educators and participants; encourages collective ownership of the process; and makes participants more ready to take risks, knowing they can survive the critical feedback – that they can, in fact, be stimulated by it.

Building on curious and open responses to criticism will encourage participants to be more constructively frank with each other. This in turn builds a spirit of inquiry and trust. Participants will understand that criticism is designed to strengthen people and their work, and not to belittle or demean them.

Tips on giving and getting feedback

A strategy we've used in many skillshops with educators is to develop guidelines for feedback. The following tips draw on participants' own lists from such sessions and can be used by facilitators and participants alike.

- ✧ **Talk in the first person.** Statements such as "I felt ..." or "When I heard you say ..." communicate personal responsibility for responses. They do not claim, nor should they, to speak for others.
- ✧ **Be specific.** Statements such as "When you said this, I ..." or "Your idea about ..." focus on the particular action or statement. These statements bring the discussion close to home, make it easier to examine and tackle. Avoid comments such as "You keep ..." or "You always...".

◆ **Challenge the idea or action, not the person.** It doesn't help to draw attention to the pitch of someone's voice or a stutter. Stick to actions or behaviours that a person can modify (if they agree this would be useful).

◆ **Combine recognition of what worked with a challenge to improve.** Few people are so thick-skinned that they do not need acknowledgement of their achievements. Providing this recognition helps to situate suggestions and challenges in a context of effort and accomplishment. It helps a person hear the spirit of a positive criticism.

Again, be as specific as possible. For example, if a person sounds preachy in a part of the presentation but engages people in a lively way in another part, refer to the positive side as a specific model of tone, strategy, and style.

Explore what makes something work. Although successes are not accidents, they aren't as noticeable as problems. Uncovering the thoughts and skills behind a success can be instructive.

◆ **Ask questions to clarify or probe reasons.** Questions such as "What did you take into account when you decided ...?" or "What did you mean when you said ...?" credits the person with selection and judgement. The questions also help avoid criticisms and suggestions that miss the mark and are irrelevant to what the person is trying to do.

◆ **Identify the bridges.** When you are giving critical feedback to a participant, remind her or him of what you have in common. Comments such as "I know that when we do X we tend to ..." remind the person that you're on the same side. Sometimes a part of this same bridge may be to acknowledge differences. For example, "As a man, my experience is a bit different, but...".

◆ **Acknowledge how you connect to a problem.** Because people can learn as much from what goes badly as from what goes well, it helps to show how you have also experienced a thorny problem. Statements such as "I've had this problem, myself, too" or "This is helpful for me/us to think about because ..." emphasize that this is not just an academic exercise for you as facilitator.

◆ **Wherever possible, make suggestions for alternative approaches.** Questions such as "Have you considered ...?" or "What would happen if we tried ...?" open a range of possible different responses. The use of "we" suggests that the issue and its solution is of interest to the whole group. Encourage others to add to the generation of different options. This will make it clear that there is not just one other (and therefore better) way to do it.

◆ **Don't assume that a difference is political.** Check to see whether a conflict is based on different experience, different social identity, or a different role in the organization. The response may clarify the extent to which debate can change a person's view and ascertain how important a view is to that person's self-image.

CHALLENGING
AND
ENCOURAGING
RESISTANCE

A story

A union educator is teaching a group of shop stewards how to teach other shop stewards. As they examine the grievance procedure, one participant asks if the educator knows how many steps there are in the procedure. The educator says he doesn't know about this particular collective agreement, and he asks if anyone else in the group knows. The participant, a little irritated, asks the educator what he's doing teaching the course if he doesn't know something so basic.

The other shop stewards shift about anxiously and look expectantly at the educator. "What I know," he says, "is how to teach. I don't know about your collective agreement. If you know enough about teaching to teach this course tomorrow, then I'll go out and watch some movies and you can take over". He suggests they take a break and then come back and talk about it some more, if they need to.

After the break the participant comes over to the educator and says, "I'm ready to deal, on the basis that when we're talking about grievances, we talk. When we're talking teaching approaches, you talk."

"It won't work just like that," the educator says, "but it's a good start. We need each other to do the job. We can use each other's knowledge."

At the end of the day the "resister" approaches the educator again. He says, "It's good you stopped me when you did. It's not nice to say, but I would have pushed you out of the room."

So what's going on?

In this case the resister is operating from a set of beliefs about teaching and learning. Teachers should know a proscribed body of knowledge, and if they don't know, they shouldn't teach.

What's hidden, perhaps even from the holder of this perspective, are the answers to questions such as: "Who decided what was important to know? Why doesn't participant knowledge carry the same weight as teacher knowledge? How do such notions of knowledge reinforce dependency in participants and power in facilitators?"

In liberal adult education literature, resisters are people to be managed, suppressed, and brought on side. But a central purpose of social change education is to build resisters. (That said, we may often wish that they would develop and act out their resistance in someone else's program.) Facilitators have a dual task: to defend a program against sabotage; and to use resistance as a source of energy and potential insight in a group.

Resistance as sabotage

In this case the facilitator acknowledged the resister's question and sought an answer from participants. The resister's belief framework then moved him from an interest in the answer to a challenge to the facilitator's credibility.

The facilitator stood his ground on what he knew and what he didn't know and challenged the resister to consider this situation. He defended the program against sabotage. At the same time he encouraged the resister to reflect on the premises of his statement.

Resistance as creative moment

A further step is to use the incident, consciously, with the group. The facilitator could stop the session or perhaps, at a later point, ask participants if they ever have times in their education work when they don't know something. What do they do? What's the cost of pretending to know?

He could also ask: How do they use what participants know? What is the impact of drawing on the knowledge of participants? What is the impact if the facilitator always knows or appears to know? What behaviour on the part of the facilitator helps participants to value what they, themselves, know?

Resistance as information

Facilitators have a responsibility to look at resistance as a source of important information, of content for group learning.

Using resistance creatively for information depends on our assessment of where it's coming from. We have found five factors that it's useful to consider as a framework for thinking about this question. While they are posed here as discrete considerations, they often overlap.



BARB THOMAS

◆ **First, resistance can stem from a person's social identity and relation to power.**

For example, a man's resistance in a discussion of gender inequity may stem from feelings of guilt or anxiety (among other things). A woman's resistance in the same discussion may result from a desire to be accepted, a fear of being pinpointed, or a fear of losing small gains. For men and women the stakes in gender equity are different. The behaviour resulting from such feelings requires balanced attention to prevent the program from being capsized. At the same time the resistance can be used to clarify different stakes and different relations to power.

◆ **Second, resistance can result from discomfort with the content and perspective.** Participants may find the ideas too alien and the implications for their own lives too threatening. Conversely, people may be critical because the perspective is not challenging enough.

In either case the resistance gives facilitators information about participant responses to their assumptions or tone, or about participant readiness to engage with the issues. Facilitators can see resistance as a strong form of feedback that may signal a problem being experienced by more than one person.

◆ **Third, resistance can be about the process.** A democratic process that values the contributions of all participants takes more time than the delivery of a lecture.

Most people with little experience of the power of such a process frequently become impatient and frustrated. In the union case here the participant was resisting the facilitator's democratic use of the group's knowledge.

◆ **Fourth, resistance can arise from participants' fear about losing their jobs, and a distrust of organizational practices.** For example, in discussions about employment equity many White male employees are afraid that their jobs are on the line – fears that are fuelled by the arbitrary, past practices of management.

◆ **Fifth, "resistance" can arise from critical thinking.** As social change educators, we need to guard against hearing criticism as sabotage. Democratic practice requires not only the ability to hear and disagree but also constant attention to what we might have overlooked.

**Tips on challenging
and encouraging
resistance**

◆ **Smoke out the real agenda.** Pose questions that require resisters to clarify what they mean and what they want.

Often, what people don't say or what they signal non-verbally is what they mean. Make sure you're not spending time on diversions to the real point. When possible, refer back to a participant's earlier comments and actions so you can comment on consistencies or discrepancies.

◆ **Give people the benefit of the doubt, initially.** Social change education demands a belief that people can and want to do the right thing. This does not mean succumbing to naivety. But it does mean taking time to flesh out the experiences and sources of information that have informed an opinion.

◆ **Confront the issues.** Summarize what you hear the person saying. Encourage other participants to get involved. If no one feels able, don't back off. Use the facts and resources you have available. Pose questions that probe the resister's position. Know where you stand on the issue and explain what you are doing and why you are doing it.

◆ **Don't belittle the resister.** Even if the person is behaving in a destructive manner, stick with her or his statements and behaviour. If you counterattack, participants may close ranks against you even if they tend to agree with you. Besides, you would be violating your own principles.

◆ **Ask other participants for their responses.** If one person has had ample time to vent opinions or feelings, and you think those views are not shared by the group, ask if others share them. This deflects things from becoming a two-way conversation between facilitator and resister. It also encourages the group to take responsibility for the time they spend. (This can be a tricky situation, especially if resistance occurs while you are just getting to know participants, or if the situation is particularly volatile.)

◆ **Be prepared to shift and adapt if this is required.** Most resistance is not sabotage. If several people have concerns about moving on before a particular issue is explored more fully, propose a shift of plans to the group, so you can accommodate the anxieties or concerns you are hearing. Encouraging thoughtful resistance means that it be taken seriously and that it informs the process.

◆ **Use Resistance for new insights.** If you can, relate the resistance (as a kind of case study) to a larger issue the group is examining. Encourage people to derive new insights from what was said, and how it was said.

◆ **Know when to move on.** At some point you may have to agree to disagree. It helps, though, to restate the different positions, summarizing where there is agreement and disagreement. Then you have to agree on a process for moving on. First you may have to take a break.

If a person is obstinate and argumentative, you may have to exercise authority to move on. Be sure you have the support of at least three-quarters of the group before doing so, and then you can exercise that authority in the name of the group.

WORKING WITH
DISCOMFORT**A story**

Two facilitators, one Black, one White, are running an anti-racist facilitator-training program with twenty staff in a social service agency. Half the participants are Black and half White.

By the time the group is part-way through the program, many questions and feelings have arisen, and they all require discussion. The facilitators decide to use one session to talk in two "race-specific" groups, one for Black participants, one for White, with facilitators working in their own racial group.

The group of Black participants has a lengthy discussion about the experience of being Black in Canada and the impact of racism on lives and work. Most of them agree that Black people have no choice but to be anti-racist because as professionals, as parents, as individuals, their whole lives are conditioned by racism.

One participant disagrees. She says she has never experienced racism in Canada. The others express disbelief but the dissenting participant persists. She says that Black people cause many of their own problems, and that they just have to demonstrate more confidence and they'll be fine. She sees racism as an occasional problem caused by ignorant behaviour.

The facilitator asks about where and how she has developed her confidence, and there's a discussion about class background and privilege and about the impact these factors have on responses to racism in Canada. Many in the group are not comfortable with the discussion and several of them keep returning to stories in which White people behave in deplorable ways. Some group members also disagree about what parts of the discussion can usefully be reported back to the large group that includes White participants.

Finally the facilitator leans forward and asks, "You've all been talking about White people as though they're the only ones with any influence. What about us? What do we influence?"

There is silence. The facilitator waits. Then one participant says, "It's sometimes easier to talk about Whites than it is to talk about the things that divide us. The greater evil is White racism. It also influences the divisions between us."

The facilitator answers by saying, "Let's acknowledge that there are as many differences between us as there are between Whites. And we've been exploring some of these areas of disagreement." Participants nod.

The facilitator continues. "But there are three areas of real discomfort that it seems necessary to discuss if we are to be able to act together. One is the experience of privilege in our own backgrounds that makes us hesitate to take the risks we know are needed. A second is to concentrate on what we can influence, regardless of what White people do. The third is the degree of candour with which we share this discussion with the White participants. Do you see this as useful discussion? If so, should I record our comments?" Again, the participants nod.

In the time remaining the group tackles the questions of what they could influence and what conditions would help them take the risks involved.

So what's going on?

Discomfort is, for better or worse, an integral part of social change education. It occurs when questions of social identity, oppression, and action have an impact on a personal level. That is, it happens when discussion is no longer focused out there on "those people" but in here on us and me, and on what we are and are not doing about it.

We want to consider three factors that influence how facilitators work with discomfort: the facilitator's own stakes; the dynamics of the group; the costs of not working with the discomfort.

The facilitator's stakes

In this case the facilitator was able to relate, as a Black person, to the issues causing discomfort. She knew what they were about. She could use the pronoun "we". The group trusted her as a Black person and as a skilled facilitator. She used both these identities in her work with the group.

But this identification is not without its problems. As a Black activist she might disagree with the position of the dissenting participant who said she had no experience with racism. In this case the facilitator used her experience as a Black person only to inform her questions about confidence and privilege. At the same time, she had to play her role as facilitator and avoid taking sides. And she had to encourage supportive challenge to this participant from the other participants.

She also used her experience both as a Black activist and a skilled facilitator to name the discomfort evident in the group. But again, she had to stick to a facilitator role in drawing out the discussion and to make sure she didn't become enmeshed in her own Black activist role.

In this case she did share the relevant social identities, of race and class. She was an insider, not to the organization, but to the subject and general experience of it. And she was an educator / activist. The facilitator's stakes vary from situation to situation, but they are usually shaped by these three factors.

It is also true that our positions and discomforts change over time. To work effectively with discomfort, it is essential that we bring along our own clarity on our current stances and areas of unease, as well as on our appropriate roles.

Dynamics of the group

This case suggests four factors that we need to consider in assessing whether group dynamics provide positive conditions for probing discomfort.

First, most members of the group actively wanted to gain more knowledge and work towards informed action. There was general agreement, with one exception, on the role of racism in shaping people's lives and work. This agreement and commitment to act are an important precondition for securing permission to probe discomfort. If the group had been divided more evenly on this, or if it had been in general agreement with the dissenter, the issues would have been different. This facilitator was able to use discomfort as a catalyst to discuss the less comfortable aspects of class identification. In this way, discomfort became a resource.

A second factor was that group members had worked together with their white colleagues before this session. They had begun to develop a sense of themselves as a group, and they had enough trust to disclose more and examine those disclosures together.

Third, the group trusted the facilitator. They had observed and worked with her during the first part of the program and knew her principled, skilled leadership.

Finally, the group had the time to examine the discomfort and work with it, both during this session, and in sessions to come. Learning often happens as discomfort gets slowly digested, and people have different ways of working this through.

Costs of not working with discomfort

When they assess whether to name and work with discomfort at a given moment, facilitators must think about the costs of not doing so. In this case the discomfort was a running current in the discussion and had been avoided and unnamed.

If the facilitator had not challenged the discomfort, chances are the group would have continued to avoid these questions, which touched them so personally. But the unease would have surfaced sporadically in other ways. If this kind of unease is not named, the sporadic emissions become almost impossible to address.



RICK ARNOLD

In most groups there is both a fear that the discomfort will be named, and a great unease when it is not. People sometimes avoid the problem, because they can't quite pinpoint what's going on; or they avoid it because they don't trust the group and fear disclosure and attack. Whatever the reason, avoidance is not a healthy basis for social change education and action.

The primary agenda, in this particular case, cannot be met without addressing the secondary agenda, which is usually something like, "Where am I in this, and what's really stopping me from getting anywhere?"

Finally, activists who must take an oppositional stance and/or are part of oppressed groups have a common tendency to concentrate on publicly radical positions and avoid the mess in their own yard. This tendency can have direct implications for the way they treat each other, the honesty they bring to helping others learn and act, and the climate of trust in organizations doing social change work.

To help work through this problem, certain questions might be posed: What conditions need to be created to enable us to work with discomfort? Whose feelings are being hurt in the suppression of frank discussion? Whose feelings will be hurt in frank discussion? And what steps should be taken to address these emotions more satisfactorily?

Social change education has a responsibility to work with discomfort – not just to create a productive workshop but to improve the strength, trust, climate, and viability of the organizations working for social justice.

Tips on working with discomfort

◆ **Watch for the symptoms.** Silence, shuffling, frequent breaks, side conversations, repeated returns to more comfortable terrain, personal attacks: these are all signals of discomfort in a group. Facilitators must also watch for what people are avoiding and for when avoiding behaviour occurs, in order to name it accurately.

◆ **Name what you think it is.** In the case here, the facilitator was able to put words to what she saw. In some cases, it may be more appropriate to ask people about how they felt doing a particular activity, or about how they feel discussing a particular issue. This provides a space for participants to name for themselves what is going on.

◆ **Probe what people say they mean.** If participants say something vague and seem to be inferring something quite stronger, ask what they mean. "Say some more about that." "Do you mean this, or that?" "Are you saying that ...?" "You seem to be saying this, but earlier you referred to that. Is it hard for you to talk about ...?"

These are all ways in which facilitators demonstrate listening behaviour and at the same time challenge participants to say what is really on their minds.

◆ **Don't be afraid of silence.** Don't fill in all the spaces. Let people sit and listen to the question or statement posed. Often it takes people time to find the words or the courage to say the words.

- ◆ **Give support to talk about feelings.** No, you are not running a therapy group. But social justice work must be fuelled by feelings – anger, hope, love, fear, passion – or it becomes a very hollow affair. There is a place for analysis, a place for making statements, a place for action. There must also be a place for sharing who we are and how we feel about what we do. Discomfort usually resides in these feelings. The tips in this section suggest some ways to bring the feelings out into the open and to validate them.
- ◆ **Ask permission to pursue discomfort.** There is no point in probing discomfort if the group doesn't want to do so. Name what you think is going on, or get participants to do so, then acknowledge that this is a different way of dealing with the agenda than planned and ask if the group finds this process useful. (Facilitators have to exercise judgement to assess the appropriate moment for intervening in this way.)
- ◆ **Record what people say.** This, of course, is again subject to the group's permission. But writing comments on flip-chart paper helps the group focus visually as well as aurally on the task, helps members build on, refer to, and develop each other's insights, and helps them see common ground as well as disagreement in the group.
- ◆ **Ensure there will be time to heal.** Don't initiate this kind of process in the last five minutes of a session or at the very end of a program. People need to be able to come back together after thinking about the discussion. They can then pursue the issues further or refer to them in their continuing work together.
- ◆ **Encourage participant contributions.** Often participants offer a hand, an insight, a question that shifts the frame and signals equal responsibility for the process. The educator should be alert to such overtures and encourage them.
- ◆ **Know when to move on.** You can sense when the group has worked with a discussion of discomfort as far as it can. People start repeating themselves or introducing other subjects. The tense energy that informs talk of discomfort dissipates. When this happens, summarize the main points and suggest that participants take these things into account as they proceed with the original agenda.

CONFLICT:
HEADING INTO
THE WIND

A story

A three-day conference on coalition-building brings together two hundred seasoned educators and organizers from a variety of different sectors: aboriginal peoples, women, anti-poverty and anti-racist groups, unions, and others. The organizers have asked the facilitators to help design a participatory process for each small group, with a view to emerging with recommendations for coalition-building.

One workshop group, with twenty-eight participants speaking both English and French, sees substantial differences emerging by lunch of the first day.

The facilitators had allocated the entire morning to activities that encouraged discussion of identity and experience in activist work. They based this design on the assumption that the participants needed to know and trust the others in the room before a discussion of coalition strategy could work effectively.

Shortly before lunch a couple of White men in the group express impatience. This friendly chitchat is all very well, they say. But there's an urgency to respond to the reactionary initiatives of corporations and government. The discussion should be focusing on building unity and making a real challenge to the strengthening conservative agenda. "Let's get on with the real discussion," one of the two men says.

An aboriginal man vehemently disagrees. "It's premature and dangerous to move to strategy before trust is built," he says. "And building trust requires a deeper understanding of Native issues than this discussion has shown so far. It's time White people started listening to us."

These turn out to be the last comments before participants break for lunch, and the two facilitators are left to figure out what to do next. They quickly come up with a post-lunch activity and sketch out a possible revised agenda.

When participants return, the facilitators restate the two opposing positions, which they call "Action Now" and "Time to Listen". They ask one spokesperson for each to go stand at opposite ends of the room, leaving space at either end for more extreme positions. They ask the rest of the participants to physically place themselves in relation to these two people / positions.

Three participants join "Action Now", all from western Canada; five people join "Time to Listen", most of them from Quebec; three clusters develop somewhere in the middle. The facilitators ask the participants in these five clusters to talk to each other about why they are there. Some reshuffling happens as a result. After this a spokesperson from each of the five clusters states her or his group's views to the whole group.

The facilitators propose a revised agenda and indicate how each cluster's concerns could be met by a few further amendments. The group accepts this new agenda by consensus and the plan works well as a framework for the rest of the workshop program.

So what's going on?

Conflict will always be a feature of discussions of oppression and social action. In this case the tension appeared to be about how to spend the time available to the workshop. But these "differences of opinion" were also intimately connected to two important factors emanating from outside the walls of the workshop: unequal experiences of power based on race; and different strategies for activist work based on different analysis.

People tend to think and act based on a number of factors: their own experiences of society; the "logic" of the culture of their organizations and/or communities; and their individual inclinations. In this case the people holding different positions are all operating from an experience of and commitment to social justice. This is common ground. Participants should always be reminded, in moments of conflict, of this common ground.

Often, when you use the tension of the moment creatively the results can be more powerful than you had planned. You can only handle this process if you are clear on where you want to go and what you can drop. Paradoxically, you're more able to wing it if you're well prepared.

Power relations, respecting difference, developing ways to work together: these are the issues in social change education. In such cases a respectful and clear grappling with conflict is an important aspect of democratic practice. Participants can learn much from how they acknowledge and embrace conflict as part of learning. They can also take this learning back to their own political work.

After considering what had happened, the facilitators in this case felt they had stopped the process at the right time. Highlighting the conflict early rather than suppressing it was the key factor in the success of the workshop as a whole. Suppression would have only produced conflict later when there was no time left to address it.

Conflict can stem from a different language for talking about the same things. It can stem from an inability to listen and to hear experiences, frameworks, patterns of speech different from your own. So the facilitators' roles can include questioning, checking, challenging, and summarizing until the group reaches a certain clarity on how positions are similar and different.



ALOK MUKHERJEE

Tips on handling conflict

- ◆ **Plan for conflict about one-third of the way along.** Conflict will occur: it should be a part of the learning that takes place throughout an educational event. But participants usually start politely and carefully, which means that facilitators have to dig up earlier rather than later what's under the surface. Doing this allows time for a full discussion and further work. In our experience this stage often comes in the second day of a four- or five-day course.
- ◆ **Stop the process when conflict seems to be building up consistently.** Not all conflict is significant. But when it builds up it will sabotage the process. It's better as a facilitator to show conscious leadership and incorporate the conflict into everyone's learning.
- ◆ **Name opposing positions as clearly as possible.** Facilitators should highlight the key elements of the conflict as they hear it, allowing participants to clarify or elaborate. This allows everyone to proceed in the discussion as cleanly as possible.
- ◆ **Explore the whys as well as the whats of people's positions.** All participants should look critically at the sources of conflict as well as try to understand the experiences that have informed differing positions. Exploring the whys also affords a chance to assess how deeply held an opinion is, and whether there are new considerations that can influence it. Role-play is a useful tool for this kind of probing process.
- ◆ **Where possible, use conflict to illuminate larger social issues.** Invite participants to consider the group conflict as an example or case study of a form of larger inequity or domination. For example, in the case here the conflict in the group mirrored larger differences and concerns raised by aboriginal peoples at the conference itself.
- ◆ **Encourage participant responsibility for process.** Facilitators can lead a group in surfacing and guiding a process for addressing the conflict. But this process should not result in a limited dialogue between a facilitator and one or two participants. Participants know when they are no longer benefiting from what is going on. The facilitator can check with all participants – their energy levels, the time they want to take up – and get suggestions about approaches for moving on. A round robin can be a useful way to gain knowledge of the individual learning that comes out of a difficult situation.
- ◆ **Seek agreement on a way to proceed, not on the positions.** When opinions are firmly held and loudly stated, easy agreement is unlikely. So facilitators should only try to summarize the different positions. Seek agreement on a way to proceed that both acknowledges the differences and draws on a common interest to benefit from the workshop.

TIMING: EXIT
LINES**A story**

The final half hour of a workshop with community workers speeds by. Participants had been examining approaches to addressing conflict in their organizations. Four small groups, each with a different scenario, had prepared dramatizations that posed possible strategies. After each drama the large group would then suggest and practise a variety of ways to approach the problem.

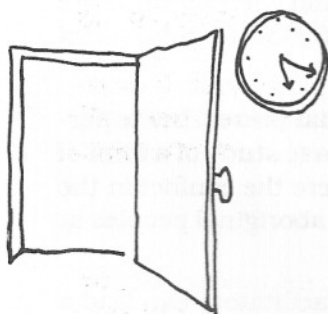
It took longer than usual for the groups to prepare their dramas and now, with five minutes to go, one group still hasn't presented its play. The facilitator asks everyone if they can stay for another half-hour. Some people nod, but a few say no. One woman, clutching her purse, gets up apologetically to say that she has to take her child to the doctor. Two others say that their street parking will expire in a few minutes so they'll have to leave. There is a general murmuring and gathering up of papers.

The facilitator, now with two minutes left, apologizes to the fourth group, telling them there isn't going to be time for their presentation. He suggests that maybe they can use it at some other time in their organization. Some group members look relieved, others annoyed.

The facilitator, speaking very quickly, begins summarizing what they had accomplished during the day. The two participants with parking problems get up, looking regretful, to go move their cars. A couple of participants are exchanging addresses and phone numbers for a future get-together. A couple of other people exchange last-minute words with the two people with over-parked cars.

At four o'clock the facilitator says to the group, "I know you have to leave. I'm sorry we were so rushed in the end. The work you did, and the insights you brought, really generated some wonderful ideas for addressing conflict. I hope you find you can use them in your work."

A few people clap, a few people gather up their papers, a couple of others remain deep in conversation.



So what's going on?

We have all had this all-too-familiar experience. You can have a good design, lots of participant energy, new insights, but none of it compensates for bad timing. In this case, bad timing is responsible for three unwanted conditions at the end of the workshop.

Unequal treatment of participants

Four small groups had prepared dramatizations, but only three of them got the chance to present their work. By the time the facilitator acknowledged the time problem, it was too late to do anything but apologize and quickly close the workshop.

In addition, the last-minute nature of the closure meant that only a few people paid attention to the wrap-up. The rest had moved on to their personal affairs.

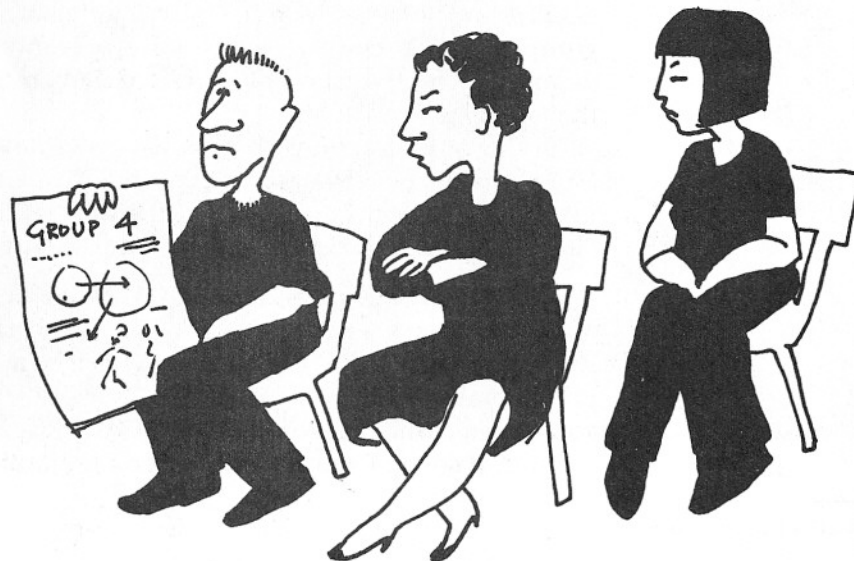
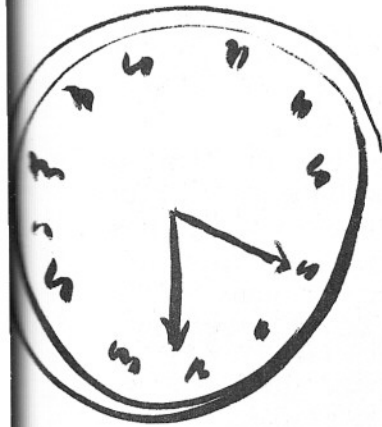
No evaluation of learning by participants

Five minutes is not enough to shift the design, find out who can stay, summarize what's been done, and elicit participant responses to the day. It takes a good half-hour in a day-long workshop for a facilitator to lead participants through a reflection on the day's work and the learnings that have emerged. This time gets even more compressed if the participants also have to stop and think about the next steps they want to take together as a group.

This is a crucial, often overlooked piece of the work. People frequently have difficulty naming what they have learned. They usually need ample time for both individual and collective discussion to help bring new insights to the surface and to consider how they will use them.

No closure on the group's work together

A shared experience of working together requires closure – an acknowledgement of what participants have learned from each other, a time to say good-bye. In this case, a few people were taking care of that informally, with whispered conversations to others who were leaving, or by exchanging phone numbers.



- Tips on timing**
- ◆ **Don't plan more than three full activities for a day.** Chapter two, on design, has more about this. When your design starts to feel complicated, it's usually a sign that your timing will be in trouble.
 - ◆ **Mark times to begin and end activities on your design notes.** This provides a guide for where you should be when. When an activity takes less or more time, you can shift accordingly as you go.
 - ◆ **Negotiate time from the beginning of the workshop.** One of the starting points of the day is confirming times for breaks, lunch, and ending. It is important to stick to the times negotiated with participants.
 - ◆ **Cut from the middle, not from the beginning or the end.** Introductions and establishing the climate and process of the workshop take approximately half an hour, depending on the length of the workshop. (See chapter two on starting points.) Evaluation and closure take another half-hour at the end.

In the case above, the facilitator should have recognized by early afternoon that he was behind schedule. He could have negotiated with the group about having only two dramatizations presented and given the other two groups observer roles. Or he could have run all four dramatizations back to back without the follow-up discussions, stopping after each one only to summarize the nature of the conflict. Then, after all the dramas had been done, the group could have chosen one to focus attention on.

These are some of the ways that you can alter timing on your feet while at the same time sticking to the objectives and rudiments of your design.

- ◆ **Cut the amount of data generated and processed.** If you are behind time, simplify the task of the small groups or limit the amount of small-group discussion reported to the large group.
- ◆ **Negotiate shifts in plans with participants.** This is not necessary when participants are not affected by the change. But in the case above, the time it took participants to prepare their dramas in small groups was extended. When facilitators notice this sort of thing happening they can do a number of things. They can indicate the time problem and suggest that the presentation of each small group be confined to a certain number of minutes. They can ask if there are groups who particularly want to make presentations and others who don't mind forgoing theirs. Or they can divide participants in half, so two groups present their dramas to each other.

If the dramatizations themselves go way over time, facilitators can, at least half an hour before the workshop's planned ending, make a proposal to spend the remaining time summarizing learning. If they do this, they must clear the change with any groups who have not presented.

- ◆ **Negotiate, when unanticipated issues arise.** Often an activity generates important discussion, conflict, or discomfort that a facilitator can't anticipate. When this happens the facilitator can share the responsibility for timing with the group, making a comment such as "We have spent fifteen minutes on this now, and it seems that we are not finished. Are people agreed that this is important to pursue? If so, we'll have to cut back on the dramatizations."

4
WORKING ON OUR FEET
Facilitation



RICK ARNOLD



DEBORAH BARNDT

THE
FACILITATOR'S
ROLE

In brief, a facilitator is responsible for working effectively with a group to help reach the objectives for an event. To do this, a facilitator must

- ◇ watch the time and make sure that pacing is appropriate to the group
- ◇ encourage the active participation of all group members
- ◇ acknowledge and draw upon differences within the group
- ◇ encourage the precise and frank naming of issues
- ◇ draw on the range of knowledge and experience in the group
- ◇ offer information, frameworks, and insights when appropriate
- ◇ summarize what's been accomplished at strategic points during the session
- ◇ constructively address conflict and discomfort
- ◇ work democratically, with the space, resources, time, and people in the room
- ◇ encourage critical questions and problem posing
- ◇ consciously build a spirit of collective as well as individual inquiry and will to act.

Social change facilitators must push beyond the limits of liberal adult education

- ◇ in the questions and problems they pose
- ◇ in the ways they engage intellect, emotions, and creativity
- ◇ in the conceptual connections they encourage
- ◇ in the democratic relations they establish between learners and facilitator
- ◇ in the explicitly political task they undertake as educators
- ◇ in the constant self-assessment of stakes, commitment, risks, and tolerance of ambiguity that this work requires.

In framing this discussion around the eight arenas of facilitator work – using space, making the most of who we are, establishing credibility and sharing the expert role, giving and getting feedback, encouraging/challenging resistance, working with discomfort, addressing conflict, and timing – we have tried not only to place the role of facilitator into a working context but also to make it inclusive of different sectors, issues, and objectives. We also wanted the cases, cumulatively, to celebrate and speak to the range of social change education in which we and our readers are engaged.

At the same time we are aware that these cases are limited. They are only examples and we haven't been able to provide examples of the issues and dynamics facing differently abled people, poor people, or older people in workshop situations. This speaks to gaps in our own knowledge and experience. We hope that the other people in our network and wider educational community who work with different sectors will take this as an invitation to use what is helpful here – and to find opportunities to share what they know with us.